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OR,

The Boomer's Last Battle.

A Tale of the Beautiful Land.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "BILLY BLAZES," "JIM DANDY,"
 "KEEN CLEM," "SANDY ANDY," "LARIAT
 LIL," "OLD WEASEL-TOP," "COLORADO
 KATE," "LITTLE JINGO," "PATENT-
 LEATHER JOE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BOUNCING THE BOOMERS.

THE officers' quarters at Fort Reno were ring-
 ing with merry laughter, and—if the truth, the
 whole truth, and nothing but the truth must be
 told—with the clink of glasses as well.

Charley Foraker had just been telling what

"GOOD BY! DEADMAN DOLPH NEVER SURRENDERS TO BOOMERS OR BLUE-COATS!"

all the jolly crew united in pronouncing "a good one."

Lieutenant Westerly was particularly pleased that his friend should take so well among his brother officers. His own popularity would not suffer for his having afforded them such a treat.

Truth to tell, there was every reason why Charley should be an agreeable companion.

To begin with, he was unusually handsome. His lady friends—and he had a host of them—were unanimous on that point, while those of his own sex who had to hold their own against him knew it often to their cost.

Of course ugly people will always decry personal beauty; but the very flouting of envy proves that we all secretly think it a mighty fine possession.

Wherever Charley went faces brightened, as if he brought cheerfulness with him; and whatever he was pleased to say, passed for wit or wisdom, as the case might be, sometimes, it must be confessed, for no very good reason save that it was he who said it.

But Charley's claims to popularity did not stop with the physical man.

He could tell a good story; he could sing a good song, jolly for the boys, sentimental for the girls, and—well, for the old folks, steady-going!

Best of all, there was a sincerity in his hearty laugh, and loyalty and courage in his eye.

The fun of the mess-room was arrested by the entrance of an orderly, who saluted, and announced that Lieutenant Westerly was required to report at headquarters immediately.

There was a general groan of protest; but Westerly responded with soldierly promptness, saying as he went out:

"You'll never miss me, fellows. Get Foraker to sing you 'The Gay Little Widow of Hemingway Hall.'"

The room instantly rung with heel-taps, and the demand:

"Yes! yes! Give us the little widow!"

The song was well rendered, and so well received that no living minstrel could have escaped giving another, by way of an encore.

This was ruthlessly broken in upon by the return of Westerly, fairly out of breath.

"Boomers, boys!" he shouted. "Not a minute to spare! Oklahoma Hi just in with 'b'ar sign.' I'm off for a scout. What do you say to going along, Charley? You're out here for fun. Now's your chance."

"Nothing would be more to my taste, if I sha'n't be in the way."

"In the way! Of a bullet? I hope not! You'll have to take your chances of that, though."

"I'll take them, and, as the old maid said, thank you too!"

"Good enough! We've got the best scout in this section of country. He generally knows what he's talking about. And we're sure to run something up a tree before we turn in again."

"I'm with you! Gentlemen, I'm sorry to leave your company, but—"

"You'll see enough of that crowd before you get away, if indeed they leave you money enough to get out of the country with. Come on!"

In spite of the hurry, two or three managed to grasp Charley by the hand; and half a dozen wished him good luck in his adventure.

Then he was out on the parade-ground, where he met Oklahoma Hi for the first time, and took to him at once.

There could not well be a greater contrast than between the border scout and this gilded youth of an Eastern metropolis.

Hiram Ochiltree was long and lank and raw-boned—a typical Pike, from that famous county of Missouri. His skin—but it is more appropriate to say his hide—was like leather; and instead of the spick and span cleanliness of Charley Foraker, it must be admitted that Hi was untidy in more ways than one.

But there was an honest grip in the scout's iron hand; and his cold gray eyes had a directness that bespoke him a man to tie to.

One glance satisfied Hi that there was nothing effeminate or dandish in Charley's rather dainty care of his person. It was the nicety of a gentleman, which in no way interfered with the virility of a man when occasion demanded.

So it was that these two, so like in many things, though so different in some, cottoned to each other at once.

"I hope I see you well, sir," said Hi, with western heartiness.

"I am well," replied Charley, "with no danger of being worse for this glorious country. I need not return the compliment by asking after

your health. I don't believe the doctors ever got much chance at you."

Hi chuckled a well-satisfied laugh.

If any one but Charley Foraker had made that remark, with the same look of undisguised admiration, the scout would probably have scanned him out of the corner of his eye, if he did not snub him openly with a contemptuous: "What're ye givin' us?"

But it came from Charley with an air of the frank recognition of kindred qualities by one manly man in another; and Hi was hugely flattered by it.

"Waal, I hain't never give 'em no show yit," he replied, "barrin' the pluggin' of a few bullet-holes what no man kin dodge all the while."

Then they were into the saddle and away, followed by a squad of soldiers.

In the exhilaration of the moment Charley exclaimed to his entertainer:

"By Jove, Bert! I'm more than half sorry I didn't go to West Point with you, when I had the chance. This is what I call jolly good living!"

"It is, till you get a bullet through you that's past patching," laughed Westerly.

"Oh, that's all in a lifetime. It's a soldier's fortune. But while you live, live, say I! And it seems to me I have never lived so much to the square inch in all my life before. What delicious air you have out here."

"It has all o' God's creation to circulate in," observed Oklahoma Hi, who would not have obtruded himself, had not Charley turned to him as he spoke. "Thar ain't nothin' to hender. It's a pity, though, to throw it away on some o' the scalawags what lays outdoors hyar."

"The boomers?" asked Charley, with a smile at the scout's warmth.

"Boomers be blowed!" ejaculated Hi. "Thar's worse'n boomers in this hyar country; an' don't you furgit it!"

"Why, I thought that they were the last sore on the body politic just about here; Mr. Lo being for the moment comparatively well-behaved."

"Injuns is Injuns all the while," answered Hi, with the inveterate race-hatred of the border. "But thar's white Injuns hyar what's a blame sight worse'n ary red one you ever see. What they're boomers fur ain't no Gover'ment land, not by a long shot! It's rocks they're after, every time; an' they don't stop at blood to git it, if thar's ary kickin'."

"What! You don't mean deliberate outlawry, robbery and murder?"

"I don't, eh? Waal, I jest do—beggin' your pardon fur the contradiction!"

"And is that the kind of fellows we are after now?"

"I don't say as to that. You kin size 'em up when we pull 'em in."

Charley looked at the scout curiously.

There was an odd and altogether unexpected reserve in his manner.

"Thar's more'n one man been dropped out between two days in this hyar section—I will say that," was the nearest he would come to committing himself to any direct charge.

It was not long before they were traversing what the Indians have called Oklahoma, "the beautiful land," here skimming over the prairie as if on winged steeds, there plunging into the dense shadows of the timber.

Shaping their course toward the southeast, they followed the banks of the treacherous Canadian, whose quicksands have swallowed up more than one unlucky outfit, horses and wagon and driver too, if he did not look sharp.

At noon they stopped to breathe their horses and regale themselves with a soldier's fare, the simplest of food, with "hungry sauce" for a relish.

It was well into the afternoon when they came upon a wagon-trail, at what seemed to Lieutenant Westerly the most unlikely spot in the world.

"The scalawags!" he exclaimed. "There isn't a ford within a good ten miles of here. They must have taken long chances to steal in at this unguarded point."

"It would set hard on their conscience to be strictly honest about it," observed Oklahoma Hi.

"They have less than a week to keep hid now," said Foraker, "and they will be the first on deck."

"We'll give 'em a chance fur a fresh start," declared Hi, dryly.

"We'll get no thanks for our interference," laughed Charley.

"They're welcome to kick," answered Hi. "Out they go, anyway."

They followed the trail into a timber-tract,

the gloom of which suggested

bilities to the jaunting civilian.

"What an excellent place to

off our horses from behind these

"What an excellent place for

of the droppers!" retorted Hi.

Nevertheless he was covertly w

He knew that he had desperate me

with.

As he had said, the boomers were ne

worst of the motley crew that had flocked to

ward the new El Dorado from the four points

of the compass.

He might have quickened his pace if he had

known what that timber tract hid from view.

All that day a man had been perched high in

the swaying top of a tree on the border of the

woods, gazing out over the prairie toward the

northwest.

He had discovered the soldiers when their

combined numbers formed but the faintest mov-

ing speck on the distant horizon.

A gun-shot that echoed under the hollow can-

opy of the woods as in the nave of a cathedral

brought an excited horseman to the spot, who

scrambled into the branches and demanded the

telescope from the hands of this outpost.

"Soldiers, Cap," was the terse announcement.

"Are you sure of it?" demanded the new-

comer, with the irritation of an ugly disposition

on the receipt of unwelcome intelligence.

"Size 'em up fur yerself. You'd see 'em

plainer ef they wasn't so nigh in a line with the

sun."

The man addressed as Cap gazed long and in-

tently through the telescope, and then broke in-

to a volley of oaths.

"It's Oklahoma Hi, I'll bet a hoss!" he de-

clared. "I'd give a mite o' somethin' to git a

fa'r and squar' crack at that snoozer with no-

body to come back at me!"

"You won't git it this round," answered the

other, with the freedom of men where subordi-

nation is not very clearly established. "The

sooner we git, the less Hi'll hev' to say to us, I

reckon."

The captain swore sullenly, as he proceeded to

act on his subordinate's suggestion, and both

slid to the ground.

The watcher had a horse tethered near at

hand; and he was soon riding at the side of his

superior, who, with contracted brow, was medi-

tating in some perplexity on the situation.

"We don't want Oklahoma Hi to go pokin'

his nose into that thar wagon," suggested the

scout; "or maybe Deadman Dolph's claim won't

never be entered in no land-office book in this

hyar country!"

"Hang the land-office, an' the claim too!"

growled the fellow, who was known as Captain

Deadman. "But you're mighty right, Toby."

"Sup se we bury it?" suggested Toby, still

further. "It was a blame-fool notion to hang

on to it. I will say that!"

"Why, blast your eyes! don't you 'low as I

know my business?" demanded Captain Dead-

man, with the verbal expression, but not much

of the manner, of anger.

He went on in an explanatory tone:

"Thar ain't but one place fur to bury that

sort. You know that as well as I do. Ef we

was goin' with a free foot, we could leave it out-

doors anywhar."

"The quicker we git it whar no investigatin'

committee won't unairth it, the easier our col-

lars will set all 'round."

"We'll have to make a dead break fur the

Canadian, an' that's all thar is about it!"

The captain began to swear, as at an unwel-

come alternative.

"You bet!" answered Toby, as if that settled

the matter as far as he was concerned.

So it happened that when Oklahoma Hi, with

the soldiers at his back, came out on the further

side of the timber tract, he discovered in the

distance, making straight for the south, a tilted

schooner, accompanied by half a dozen men on

horseback.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Charley Foraker,

"that looks like a retreat."

"They're making for the Canadian," said

Bert Westerly.

"To save us the trouble of helping them

across!" laughed Charley.

"They're mighty obligin'," observed Oklahoma

Hi, with a meditative contraction of the brows.

"It's a shy boomer that runs his stock like

that, in his anxiety to escape that bugaboo of

forfeiture. If every man who steals in here be-

fore our grand opening-day loses his right to

enter land, it will be because the officers have

struck an unusual streak of virtue."

"An' it's a mighty queer spot on the Canadian

he's p'intin' fur. He must know well enough—

"a fool ef he don't—as thar ain't no ford fer. I tell you what it is, lieutenant, I've a notion to overhaul that snoozer, an' take a look at him anyway."

"Of course we will."

"Hyar goes, then! Boys, another hole in the girth."

As one man they leaped to the ground, drew their surcingle one hole further up, and swung back into the saddle.

Then away over the prairie like the wind!

"Hurrah!" shouted Charley Foraker, to whom this promised to be the rarest lark of his life.

"They're comin' fur us, Cap!" announced Toby Two-bits, as he was called.

"Ef they ketch us, thar ain't nothin' fur it but fight! Remember that, boys!" admonished the captain, with a plentiful interlarding of oaths.

As if they had no relish for this prospect, his men rode on either side of the flying mules that drew the schooner, lashing them mercilessly, and yelling to get every inch of speed out of them in that headlong flight.

So the race began.

CHAPTER II.

A NECK-OR-NAUGHT RACE.

NEVER was better speed got out of a span of mules; and never had runaways a better course to show the lightness of their heels.

Far away on the southern horizon appeared the dark belt of timber that marked the river bed of the Canadian, while just in sight to the northward came the pursuers.

"Kin we make it, Toby?" asked Captain Deadman, anxiously, measuring both distances with his eye.

"Ef we do make it," answered Toby Two-bits, "we'll never git acrost the Canadian whar we strike it. You hyear me?"

"It don't make no manner o' difference whether we git acrost or not," declared the captain. "The thing fur us is to git into that water before Oklahoma Hi ketches on to us."

"Ef we git stalled in the stream, can't he overhaul us jest the same, an' take his time about it?"

"He won't overhaul nothin' what I leave in that thar stream!"

"Maybe he won't."

"Keep 'em a-goin' boys!" shouted Deadman Dolph. "Ef you're tenderer o' their hides than of your own necks, you'll let 'em git ketched!"

It was soon evident that the boys were not likely to let any fanatical tenderness stand in the way of their personal safety.

Lash, spur and voice were made to do all they could, to the end that the bourne be passed before the inquisitive eyes of Uncle Sam's representatives had a chance to peer within the tilt of that mysterious schooner.

"They'll beat us!" cried Charley Foraker. "They're lashing those horses out of their hides!"

"That ain't their best show," responded Oklahoma Hi.

"It's going to be enough for us, I'm afraid. But what's the better?"

"Look a' that thar sun."

"By Jove! It's on the horizon already!"

"It'll be dark before we close this gap."

"But there won't be room for them to give us the slip. They will be so close to the river, and we so close onto them, that we can tell which way they turn."

"Ef they turn!"

"They'll have to, or plunge straight into the river."

"So they will."

"Do you think they will do that? I thought you said there was no ford about here?"

"That's so."

"Then how are they to get out of it?"

"Out o' the river? That's their own job."

"But they won't be fools enough to throw away their outfit rather than get caught."

"I'll tell you better later."

Charley wondered what the scout was mulling over. His non-committal air, and the look in his eye seemed to indicate some sort of suspicion.

"Do you know who it is?" Foraker asked, as a leader.

"No."

"Had you seen them before you came for us?"

"I had got on to the trail. I sized up the party, an' knowed it wouldn't do no good to go fur 'em alone. My hide won't stop an ounce o' lead no easier'n any other man's."

"Are they so desperate as that?"

"They're hyar on the make, an' don't you furgit it!"

But conversation at that furious pace was a severe tax, and Charley felt that he was getting out of wind.

Ride as they would, they saw the sun go down with the fugitives still well in advance.

The short twilight of the plains faded away as if a veil had suddenly been let down over the face of nature.

Then the stars came out in a sky of purple velvet.

How brilliant they were! Here and there a planet shimmered in lambent beauty, like a shield of silver hung tremulously on high.

Meanwhile Toby Two-bits and another had been selected by their leader for an urgent service.

"Push ahead, boys, an' take that stream up an' down. Find a place whar we kin git into the water without tumblin' the wagon over on the mules' backs. Lively! Them devils'll be onto us ef we stop long enough to shift a saddle-girth."

"Cap," called the driver, "will I pitch it into the drink while we're goin' over?"

"You'll pitch nothin'!" ordered the captain.

The driver reflected on the situation, and then decided for himself:

"I'll shake my boots, anyhow, an' be in shape to shift fur myself, ef I see this thing goin' to Kingdom Come!"

This precaution he carried out, and it proved lucky for him that he did so.

Into the timber that bordered the water-course rode Toby and his comrade.

Under the trees it was so dark that nothing could be made out save as it was thrown into silhouette against the surface of the stream beyond, where it caught and reflected some chance ray of light.

For the most part, mirroring the black shadows from the further bank, the gliding waters ran like ink.

Toby Two-bits was not a particularly impressionable man, yet this scene made his blood run cold.

It seemed to be a spot selected for deeds that shunned the light. Never would those black waters yield up a secret committed to their keeping.

They might engulf the murderer, and hold him too!

But nothing deadens thought like a pressing duty, and Toby had his hands full just then.

Leaping from his horse, he ran along the bank of the river, contenting himself with the first spot at which it would be possible to get the wagon into the water without capsizing it.

Then he ran out to the prairie, and fired a pistol, the flash of which, as well as its sound, would guide the flying wagon to the spot.

Into the timber it plunged, only checking its speed sufficiently not to run the risk of a wreck against some obstacle.

The mules were lashed into the stream, no one having the faintest idea what would be the outcome of the venture.

Nearly to midstream they made their way, floundering spasmodically.

Then, of a sudden they plunged into a hole, going completely out of sight, to reappear swimming for their lives.

But almost at the same instant the nigh fore-wheel sunk as if the bottom of the river had dropped out from under it, and the wagon turned over on its side, submerging its canvas tilt entirely.

With a yell of terror, as it seemed as if he were about to be caught under the tilt as it dipped forward, the driver had just time to throw himself into the water.

A good swimmer, he had well-nigh all his pluck scared out of him, as, looking back over his shoulder, he saw nothing but a part of one hind-wheel left above the water, while, thus anchored, the struggling mules swung round with the current, one of them being dragged out of sight under the other.

The respite of the survivor was but brief. He made a brave fight for his life, but the remorseless current sucked him steadily under.

A scream of terror, and his head, too, disappeared.

"Off yer hosses, boys!" shouted Captain Deadman. "Don't swamp 'em if you kin help it. We're in the quicksands, as sure as shootin'!"

Most of the men had not waited for this suggestion, but had at once cast themselves out of the saddle, to relieve their floundering animals of their weight.

A hand on the pommel of the saddle, or a grip on a horse's tail, was enough to sustain

them in the water. But one and all had a mortal terror of trusting a foot on that treacherous bottom.

Few men have a perfectly sane view of the peril of quicksands. They have been invested with superstitious terrors wherever men have fallen victims to their fatal tenacity. If the bottom of the river had been the harbor of fiends waiting for a grip on some unwary foot, these fellows, otherwise so reckless, could not have shrunk from it with greater horror.

Was a single one to escape alive? With shivers of dread, they thought of a ghastly companion who was not struggling for his life with the rest of them!

But suppose he had burst the chains of death! Suppose he was now seeking his revenge!

"Help! Help!" gasped Kip, the driver. "Fur the love o' God, boys, he's got me! Help! oh, help!"

The cry curdled their blood. Instead of feeling the impulse to go to the aid of the drowning man, not one there but longed only to get further and further away from him.

Ten minutes later a straggling cavalcade plunged into the timber, to gather on the bank of the stream.

Not a sight—not a sound! The black river rolled sullenly by. The wind sighed dismally in the trees.

"We're too late!" ejaculated Charley Foraker, with disappointment in his panting voice.

"I reckon we be," admitted Oklahoma Hi.

"Unless they're hidden somewhere here in the timber. It is dark enough for them to stand within arm's-length, and we never know it."

"I don't reckon we'll find hide or hair o' that crowd on this side o' the river."

"But can they have crossed?"

"It won't take long to find out."

The scout leaped from his horse, and went poking about in the dark.

Presently he said:

"Stand out o' range, boys. Thar ain't no use o' more'n one of us runnin' the resk o' gittin' plugged."

"What do you mean?" cried Charley.

"I'm 'lowin' to light a torch, to see whar that wagon trail goes into the water."

"And make yourself a target for some scoundrel on the other bank! I'll take that torch, if you please."

And Charley leaped from his horse in turn.

"The deuce you will!" ejaculated Hi. "Maybe you've got a casin' o' cast-iron outside o' you?"

"I am a stranger. None of them will have any particular spite against me. But, knowing you, they may like nothing better than a chance to rub you out, as you say out here."

"Waal, that's purty good fur talk; but it won't wash."

"There is no use in either of you running unnecessary risk," interposed Lieutenant West-erly. "The wagon can't have taken to the water without leaving a trail that you can easily find, Hi."

"Give me time."

"There is all the time you want. If they are on this side, they can't get away from us; and if they are on the other, or in the quicksands, we are not likely to care to follow them."

"Good enough!" was Hi's assent.

And he set about to examine the spot, assisted by the others.

The descent into the stream was found. Then they stood silently on the bank, gazing out over the water, and listening again.

"Boys," said Oklahoma Hi, in a hushed voice, "that thar outfit never got acrost the drink hyar—you hyear me?"

And a dead hush fell upon the party.

It was Charley Foraker who broke the silence at last, in an awed voice.

"It can't be that they are *all* in there?"

"Maybe we'll see in the mornin'," said Oklahoma Hi.

"Shall we wait here?"

"No use. We'll make for a ford, an' go up on the other side."

"To-night?"

"As well now as any time. We hain't got nothin' else to do."

So they set out, following the course of the river for several miles before they came to a spot where Hi announced that it would be safe to attempt a crossing.

Having first gone down the river, their course back was up-stream.

But they had scarcely effected a crossing, when they discovered the twinkling of a camp-fire a little further down-stream on that side, till now hidden by a bow in the river.

"Ef we kin git a place to bunk down with

our feet to the fire, I reckon it wouldn't be a bad idee to turn in fur the night hyar," suggested Oklahoma Hi.

"If it doesn't prove to be our friends in the race!" laughed Charley Foraker.

"No fear o' them settin' out a guide post."

The strains of a fiddle at this moment reaching the ear with a shift of the wind, proved the soundness of Hi's forecast.

"A boomers' camp!" cried Charley, "and a merry crew. Listen! That is somebody calling the figures of a cotillion. He has a blacksmith's voice! It's a pity he hasn't a company in proportion. But there must be women there. I say, fellows, this is capital!"

It was evident that he was not the only one of that opinion.

Every man of them brightened at the prospect of a dance with a real live woman—a "white" woman, as they put it, with a meaning peculiar to the border.

But not one of their eyes brightened as did Charley Foraker's at something he found in that boomers' camp.

"Oh, yes! oh, yes! oh, yes!" yelled Oklahoma Hi, as they approached.

It was the old device of the savage by which one who comes as a friend announces his approach while yet at a distance which precludes treachery.

The fiddle stopped abruptly, and soon dark figures could be seen against the background in the firelight.

The men came out with arms in readiness, yet their welcome was hearty enough when they discovered Uncle Sam's boys in blue.

There were three tilted wagons, and a score or so of people, among whom Charley Foraker had eyes for but one.

It was a girl with a very white, almost bloodless face, great dark eyes, jet-black hair, and a slender figure draped in funereal weeds.

"A black swan!" breathed Charley, involuntarily staring at her till the blood mounted into her cheeks, while her eyes fell before his with a confusion that enchanted him more and more. "What is she doing among these altogether ordinary ducks?"

CHAPTER III.

GUILTY, OR NOT GUILTY?

In that simple society the formality of personal introduction was not regarded. Every one was heartily welcomed, and made himself free according to his tastes.

With the soldiers and the girls they selected without ceremony, the principal requirement was a ready tongue in your head—if with a touch of the blarney, so much the better.

They were soon dancing measures that would have considerably astonished the goddess of the graceful art, but quite to the liking of their partners, who didn't object to swinging the corners with such breezy vigor that their feet with difficulty kept the ground.

One there was who did not participate in this rough sport.

On a wagon-seat that had been taken from the box, and placed on the ground, sat the girl who had attracted Charley Foraker's attention, following the dancers with a quiet smile.

Plainly it was only by her own wish that one so lovely was left to play wall-flower.

She had for a companion a woman of double her age, fat and forty, if not markedly fair.

But, deprived of the younger women by the soldiers, a jolly old fellow insisted on the bulky dame favoring him in the dance.

In vain her laughing protest. He bore her off almost bodily.

This was Charley's opportunity, and you may believe he was not "backward about coming forward" to claim it.

"You do not seem to be enjoying yourself with the rest," he observed, pleasantly, walking up to the fair stranger.

She smiled a charming response, with a touch of heightened color.

"Oh, I am enjoying it, very much, indeed."

"May I sit here, and share your observation? We ought to get some sport out of it together."

"If you would not rather dance," she answered, shyly.

"Will you dance?" he asked, with a brightening that brought the color still more profusely into her cheeks.

"Oh, I—I shall have to beg you to excuse me. I do not dance."

She said it with a pathetic little drop in her voice, and understanding the allusion to the bereavement which her mourning garb indicated, Charley's manner softened as he took his seat beside her.

"But it is impossible that you should not be a dancer," he insisted, so gently and so simply that the implied compliment did not embarrass her. "I think I saw it in your walk, a moment ago."

"I know how, of course," she assented. "But I have not danced since my mother died."

Under other circumstances Charley would have shown his sympathy in reverential silence; but his curiosity about this girl, so different from the people with whom he found her, was so strong that he could not let slip this opening to find out her relation to them.

He only lowered his voice, as he went on:

"And is that your father who seems to be at the head of this party?"

"Uncle Trask?" she asked, following his glance.

Charley experienced huge relief, with a disposition, however, to demand more, having got so much.

The man was well enough in his way; but Charley didn't want her to be related to him at all.

Her next words set him quite at rest on that score.

"Oh, no. He is a very dear friend, whose kindness I can never repay."

"He has a kind look," observed Charley, making this discovery with surprising abruptness. "That is his wife, I suppose, who sat here with you?"

"Yes. She is almost a mother to me."

"I know I shall like her," declared Charley. "She looks like a dear good soul. How pleasant it is to see middle-aged people so fond of each other."

There was nothing very sage about this observation, surely. Charley felt that he was fast sinking into lover-like idiocy.

But he said it in that way of his which, as we have said, made his least consequential remark pass respectable muster with most listeners.

Moreover, a young girl does not look for wisdom in those whom she finds most agreeable; so this one assented to Charley's praise enthusiastically.

"So you are coming out into this wild country quite alone," he pursued. "Are you not afraid?"

"In the care of Uncle Luke? "Oh, no. If you knew him, you wouldn't think I need be."

"But there are hardships from which he cannot shield you. You cannot be used to this sort of life."

"My home has been in St. Louis. But I have always been fond of the country; and I think I shall like it. It is very beautiful out here. Is not Oklahoma well-named?"

"I have been delighted with it myself," admitted Charley. "But I ought to confess that it is without the prospect of much active pioneering on my part. It takes hard work to build up a home in a new country, I'm afraid."

On the one hand, he knew that it was ungenerous to try to make her dissatisfied with her life before she had fairly entered upon it; but on the other, he felt a blind impulse to paint it in such startling colors as to make her the more willing to give it up.

He was conscious too of an awakening jealousy of Luke Trask and his fat wife. What right had such ordinary people to win the affection he saw following them in this divine creature's eyes?

"I am not afraid of hard work," she replied, with the boldness of ignorance, Charley thought.

"You can't be very used to it," he observed, with a smiling glance at her hands.

What dainty hands they were! So white, so soft, so shapely, with taper fingers, and rose-tinted nails.

She impulsively withdrew them from his sight, blushing still more deeply.

"It will be made light for me, I know," she answered.

Then dropping her voice:

"And there was no choice."

Charley longed to put his arm about her, and assure her that she had a brighter fate in her own hands, if she would only deign to accept it.

It was curious how her helplessness appealed to him.

"Not that I could have found truer friends, or those that I loved more," she hastened to add, as if fearful of some disloyalty to those who had been so kind to her. "Mrs. Trask was my nurse, and I have always called her Auntie. When I stood alone, she opened her arms to me."

"May I ask your name?" pleaded Charley.

"I have not heard it yet."

"Alice Coverleigh," she answered, simply.

"Is it pos—"

But he broke off abruptly.

The piteous appeal in the eyes that were raised to his face cut the words short in his throat.

"You have heard!" she murmured, scarcely above a whisper.

He put out his hand, and closed it hard over hers.

"I never believed it!" he assured her. "Nobody in his senses could credit such a thing for a moment. If there is a perfect idiotic thing in this world, it is a jury! To disagree with the evidence as plain as—as their ears!"

The girl's eyes were swimming in tears.

"My poor dear papa would not hurt the least living thing!" she declared. "They might as well have killed him. He never looked up after that."

"Will you walk to the river-bank, dear Miss Coverleigh, till you are more composed?" pleaded Charley. "The moon is up, and the quiet loveliness of the scene will be soothing. I shall never forgive myself for so distressing you. But I hope that you will believe that never for a moment have I doubted the perfect innocence of your father."

"You are very kind!" she said, gratefully, rising at once, and averting her face from chance observation of the revelers.

It was but a step or two, and they were still in sight of the dancers; but with her back to the firelight no one would see the tears that coursed down her cheeks.

Charley got his blanket, and spread it at the roots of a tree that dipped its branches in the smoothly-flowing current.

Sitting here beside her, he reached out his hand and put it upon hers, assuring her again with renewed earnestness of his sympathy and confidence.

Whether it was that some subtle sympathy already made him seem not a stranger to her, or that grief smothered for the time the instinctive coquetry of her sex, she did not seem to notice this rather premature familiarity.

"Uncle Luke has said so a hundred times," she answered, "and so has Aunt Mary. But oh, I have so longed to hear some one who would not say it for love of him or me—some one who would be entirely impartial, and yet who would say that all the world ought to have accepted his defense with implicit trust."

One who would not be moved to say it for love of her! If she had only felt the wild beating of Charley Foraker's heart! In that moment he was not accountable for what he might swear to.

"I do! I did from the very first!" he declared. "I was in Chicago at the time; and everybody I knew was outraged at the beastly stupidity of that verdict. And I'd like to have a hand in lynching Judge—Judge—What's his name? It ought to choke any honest man to speak it! Why didn't he set the verdict aside, and be satisfied with nothing short of an unconditional vindication?"

Charley's ideas about the powers and practices of judges were of the most nebulous sort.

Luckily his listener heeded only his generous indignation.

"How can I ever be grateful enough to you?" she exclaimed. "It breaks my heart to speak of it, it was all so dreadful; and yet I long to tell you about it."

Between the mountains and the Missouri she could not have found one more eager to hear.

However, he was a sly dog, or a lucky one, who never so far lost his head as to miss any points.

"Tell me about yourself too," he pleaded.

"Is it possible that you are entirely alone in the world?—and so young?"

"I lost my darling mother two years ago. My one comfort is that she was spared the suffering of that dreadful time."

"My poor, dear papa was cashier, you know, in the private banking-house of Holland & Son. The elder Mr. Holland had left the management of the business mostly to his son, as age came upon him."

"On the day of the tragedy he discovered that the bank had been brought to the verge of ruin by a series of unfortunate speculations."

"Mr. Harold led a very gay life, and was much liked by everybody. Maybe it was to escape reflection on the trouble he had brought on his father, that he persisted in going to a masked ball that night."

"His father went to the bank with my father, to see how deeply they were involved."

"Everything looked all right when they went in; but they had been engaged over the books and papers scarcely half an hour, when they

less startled by a sneeze close by where Mr. Holland sat.

"He sprung up, saying that there was some one in the closet, and started toward the door, as if to secure it and whoever might be shut in there, when it was suddenly thrown open, there was the flash of a revolver, and he fell dead in his tracks.

"My father sprung to protect him, and grappled with the burglar, when a second shot left him senseless.

"He only knew that the murderer was dressed in black, and had his face hidden by a black mask, which looked as if it were a piece of black silk—perhaps torn from the lining of a coat.

"They were not discovered till morning—Mr. Holland dead, my dear father yet insensible.

"When intelligence was taken to Mr. Harold Holland, he was found at home, in bed, not yet recovered from an over-indulgence in wine.

"He said that he had had a scene with his father the evening before, and knowing that the situation was irretrievable, had declined to accompany him and share in the examination of their affairs.

"He was not in the habit of drinking to excess, as all his friends knew; but the thought of a disgraceful failure had made him lose command over himself.

"He was not bitter against my father, till an examination of the affairs of the bank disclosed the fact that more money was missing than even his speculations would account for.

"Then he declared openly that my father was a defaulter, in the hope of retrieving speculations of his own. As if this were not terrible enough, he charged my father with the murder of his, deriding the story of the burglar as a transparent fabrication.

"My father, so he charged, detected in theft, had shot his father to save himself, and then attempted suicide, when he realized what he had done!

"Oh, was there ever anything so monstrous? And because there was a revolver found lying on the floor beside my dear papa, while his face was burnt with the flash of the powder, and the course of the bullet was such as it might have been if he had fired it, the jury disagreed!"

The girl dropped her face into her hands, overcome with grief.

Although, taking her own account of the case, Charley had a vague feeling that the evidence against her father was even stronger than his careless knowledge of the matter had led him to suppose, he nevertheless fell to comforting her with every assurance he could turn his tongue to.

"My poor darling told me that he had been led into speculation by Mr. Harold himself; but it was with his own money, every bit of which was lost. What he was most remorseful about, was that he had brought me to penury, as he said; as if that would make any difference! Didn't I owe every morsel of bread I put into my mouth to him?"

"Oh, if you could have known him! When they told him he was free, he came away like one drugged to stupor. From that moment he never lifted his head. He could not bear to face any one, to ask them to trust him again. He never smiled; he never spoke above a husky murmur that made my heart ache.

"Just before he died, he took my face between his hands and told me he was going to mamma; that she would know, and all my life long I must believe, that he was innocent! As if—as if—as if—"

But she could not proceed.

From that interview Charley Foraker came away with a very hazy remembrance of details. He could not tell whether he had kissed her or not; whether it might have been on the cheek, or perhaps only on the hand. But of one thing he was certain. There was a bond between them which nothing in the world but the repudiation of her own sweet lips could sever!

The conclusion of the sad story was, that Harold Holland had gone West—somewhere on the Pacific Slope, it was supposed; probably to San Francisco—to begin his broken life anew; while Alice Coverleigh, under the cloud of suspicion that overshadowed her father, was seeking to hide herself here in the wilds of Oklahoma.

On the following morning Charley Foraker rode away with the soldiers, without having suggested anything in the way of a future understanding with the girl who had impressed him so deeply, but with a very clear understanding with himself that he should not lose sight of her.

The first step in his plans was an interview with Luke Trask.

"I don't care to live in this country," he said, "but I shouldn't mind owning four forties in it, for all that. Suppose I secure a plot adjoining yours, and one of these days you will want to buy it of me. You'll find me a very easy man to deal with."

Luke Trask would have been very different from the ordinary boomer, if he had not been willing to grab all he could get, and hang on to all he got. So his assent was a very enthusiastic one.

"When you git ready, you'll find me up to the next crossin'," he said. "These hyar chaps is goin' in hyar; but me an' a pard o' mine has got our weather eye on the puttiest piece o' per-airer, with a bit o' wood land adj'inin', what lays outdoors. 'Zias he's gone on ahead; an'—don't you give it away to the sodgers, pardner! maybe he'll turn up in the right place about the time the horn blows to give us a start fur the promised land.

Luke grinned and winked with a knowing wag of the head. Possibly he saw some indications of which way the wind blew, and knew that he could trust Charley, a stranger though he was, and in company with the very guardians 'Zias was supposed to be planning to circumvent.

Honesty is a queer thing; and there are men who consider themselves pretty square-dealing, who will yet shave a corner when it comes to horse trade or the acquisition of Government land.

Luke Trask would have laughed incredulously, had a strict moralist put in its true light what he treated rather as a good joke, under the name of sharp practice.

However, his plans in this particular instance were brought to naught.

The soldiers were gone, and he had "got his traps together," as he said, and moved on, when a shout drew those who remained in camp to the river-bank.

Then amid ejaculations of resentment and dismay the body of a dead man was drawn from the water.

"Great Caesar!" exclaimed one of the men, "ef it ain't 'Zias Stacy!"

CHAPTER IV.

A BOLD INTRUDER.

THANKS to their horses, all of the mounted men in Captain Deadman's party reached the shore; while, being put to it, the driver of the ill-fated schooner managed to swim to safety.

"Waal, this hyar ain't altogether swearin' luck," declared the captain, magnanimously, when he had made a hasty enumeration of them. "That thar stiff is in as good a place as we could find fur it, an' we've got off scot-free, barrin' Kip's boots. But we ain't waitin' fur Oklahoma Hi, ye understand. So into the saddle, boys, an' git out o' this!"

Looking out over the stream, they saw that the wagon had entirely disappeared beneath the water; and once buried in the quicksands, they knew it would reveal no secrets.

Mounting in haste, they galloped away from the spot, the soft loam of the prairie muffling the thud of the horses' hoofs, while the belt of trees on the river-bank hid them from view from the other side.

It thus happened that the pursuers found nothing to indicate the issue of that plunge into the treacherous stream.

Away coursed the fugitives like phantoms of the night, never pulling up till they reached the shelter of a belt of timber fringing the border of a tributary stream.

"Hyar, boys," said the captain, "we'll build a fire, an' dry our clo'es."

"An' it won't be a bad idee to warm up from the inside, too," declared Toby Two-bits, putting a canteen to his lips.

A blaze was soon shooting up through the darkness, and by its light Captain Deadman made a startling discovery for them all.

Seated composedly in their midst, he found a man who had not been of their number on the other side of the Canadian, and who therefore had not the same use for the fire as the rest of them.

"Deploy!" cried the captain, to his men.

And instantly they surrounded the bold intruder.

"Don't waste your energies, gentlemen," urged the stranger, coolly. "Do you fancy I am here only for the purpose of running away again?"

"We don't fancy nothin' about it!" returned Captain Deadman, doggedly. "We propose to put our money on a dead-sure thing, when we kin, jest as well as not."

"Then I'm the man you want to salt it down on."

"Maybe you be, an' maybe you bain't! That depends on who you happen to be, an' what you happen to be after."

"I'm here on business—you may depend on that."

"Waal, what do you call yerself?"

"You may take a look at me, and size me up to your own satisfaction."

The stranger arose, and standing before the fire, turned round and round for inspection.

Captain Deadman was in no mood to join in this facetiousness. He knew very well that it might all be a bluff, and the man before him be there seeking to entangle his neck in a noose.

He saw a man of good physique, if his true figure was revealed by his dress. As for his features, all that was characteristic in them was pretty well hidden between a heavy beard and a pair of goggles of clouded glass.

"You're disguised, fur one thing," declared Captain Deadman, voicing a suspicion rather than a conviction.

"Undoubtedly," admitted the stranger, without a shadow of reserve. "So are you."

Captain Deadman gave a start of surprise.

Who was this with such a compromising knowledge of him?

"I saw you feeling to see if your disguise had been disarranged during your struggles in the Canadian," explained the outspoken stranger.

"You was thar?"

"To receive you as you came ashore. I saw that none of you needed my assistance, and so did not interfere."

"Who be you, an' what be you hyar fur?"

"Let us sit down, and take things more comfortably. While your clothes are drying, I will state my business. But first, I have a little story that may afford you some amusement."

Captain Deadman yielded, but like a watchful bull-dog.

Sitting with one leg thrown carelessly over the other, the stranger indulged himself in a cigar, offering what he had left to the men about him, and expressing regret that there were not enough to go round.

"A day or two agt—just how long, I don't know," he began, "a boomer stole across the Oklahoma border, intending to hide in the woods, and be the first man on the ground, at noon, on the eventful Monday that we are all looking forward to."

"He was alone. He had a well-stored prairie schooner, drawn by a span of first-rate mules."

Captain Deadman uttered a low growl, and tightened his grip on the weapon that he had held in readiness for instant use ever since the discovery of the nonchalant intruder.

Not at all disturbed by the frowning circle that shut him in, no one of whom had yet acted on his cool suggestion that they proceed with the drying of their clothes, though they could not resist the solicitation of the cigars he had given them, the stranger proceeded:

"The boomer had scarcely got into his place of hiding, when he had occasion to think that he would be somewhat worse off than nothing for his over-sharpness. He discovered a party of horsemen following up his wagon trail."

"He thought them a party of scouts, come to cook his goose for him, and was much relieved when, according to their story, they were boomers like himself, who only asked a pull at his whisky bottle, a few pipefuls of tobacco, and an evening made merry with jokes at the expense of Uncle Sam and his soldiers."

"With the prospect of securing the one gilt-edged quarter section in Oklahoma, our boomer did not grudge whisky or tobacco, in exchange for good company; and the evening began with every promise of harmony and good-fellowship."

The listeners were becoming more and more uneasy as the story progressed; but the narrator seemed very well satisfied with himself and his surroundings.

"Our boomer, however, was guilty of one indiscretion. He admitted that he knew how to play poker, and in the four-handed game which followed, it is perhaps needless to say that he was fleeced."

This statement elicited a low growl from more than one of the desperate men by whom the bold story-teller was encompassed; and they drew ominously nearer to him.

As if they were all brothers in love, he sat dreamily watching the wreaths of smoke from his cigar, as he proceeded:

"No man who keeps loading up with whisky while somebody else is unloading him at poker is likely to make even a fair use of the little wit he may happen to have been endowed with on the start."

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"Our boomer, in the heat of the game, let it be seen that he was pretty well-fixed for ready money; and from that moment it was only a question as to whether it could be transferred to the pockets of his guests with a show of fairness, or whether it would be necessary to give him his quietus, and appropriate it outright."

"The latter process," said the cool narrator, "is commonly called murder and robbery."

His auditors seemed to be fascinated by his superb audacity. They stared at him as if wondering how far he would carry this bravado, with the knowledge that his life hung upon their caprice.

"The other method," he continued, as if merely defining processes in which nobody had any personal interest, "has the milder designation of cheating."

"A miscalculation as to the shrewdness of the boomer, or as to how far gone he was in intoxication, resulted in the discovery of the devious methods of his merry guests."

"The victim *kicked*. A stab between the shoulder-blades—"

But Captain Deadman here interrupted the smooth flow of the narrative by leaping to his feet with a roar of fury, while he covered the heart of the story-teller with his cocked revolver.

"You saw it, curse you! You saw it!" he belated.

Countenanced by his example, weapons leaped into view on all sides.

The stranger looked up, as if only mildly surprised at this demonstration.

"My dear sir," he protested, "pray keep your seat. There is no cause for all this excitement, I assure you!"

"In the fiend's name, who air you?"

"Your most obedient servant."

"How did you find out what you've been a-givin' us?"

"As you stated a moment ago, I saw it."

"You did, eh? Waal, I lose my guess ef it ain't a mighty dear *saw* fur you!"

The devilish ferocity that glared in Captain Deadman's eyes and rasped in his voice would have tried the nerves of most men.

The stranger only smiled pleasantly.

"Sit down, and let us talk it over quietly."

"How did you happen to see this hyar?"

I was seeking Ozias Stacy, supposing that he had some friends of mine in his company, when I was held in check by your approach. After witnessing the occurrence I have described, you will not be surprised that I thought it advisable not to present my respects to you just then."

"But you seem to have changed your mind."

"Because of a new idea which occurred to me after I had evaded you."

"As Stacy was alone, and above all dead, he could be of no use to me. I therefore left the territory in which I had no further interest. It was by the merest accident that I saw you fleeing before the soldiers; and then occurred to me the idea to which I have referred. I took pains to intercept you at your point of crossing the river, joined you in the dark, and here I am."

"Whar you're likely to stay! Do you reckon I'm fool enough to let you out o' my grip with what you know?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it."

"What's to hinder me from slittin' your weasand, an' then buryin' you in the quicksands along o' this hyar fool boomer?"

"What usually makes rogues faithful to one another—self-interest."

Deadman Dolph received the stranger's sarcasms like slaps in the face. They seemed to daze him. Wonder as to the source of the man's confidence, when he was so utterly in his power, kept him from proceeding at once to extremities.

"What interest have I in leavin' you a-holt of a rope with the noose round my neck?"

"How is it that you trust the men associated with you? Any one of them could betray you as easily as I."

"An' hang himself!"

"Exactly; They are as much in your power as you are in theirs. Hence your mutual security. Well, I am going to put myself in the same relation to you, and then make it worth your while to join me in a little scheme I have on hand."

"But how'll I know you ain't a detective, playin' off on me? I don't know you."

"You will have me in your power till you are satisfied that I have compromised myself unmistakably. When I have told you why I am in this country at all, why I have come in dis-

guise, and what I propose to do, I think we will have no trouble about coming to an understanding."

"Waal, blow your leetle game, an' we'll see what we think of it."

"As my business is with you, and not with all of your men, I will trouble you for an interview in which we shall have privacy."

"You'll git me out o' the reach o' the boys till you spring some trap on me! Oh, yes, you will! You're playin' a purty bold game o' bluff; but I'll go you odds that you don't git out of it with a straight neck!"

"You are very suspicious," answered the stranger with a smile.

As coolly as he had proceeded from the first, he disarmed himself, then arose, saying:

"You know whether I have any men in this vicinity. If I am alone and unarmed, I fancy you will not hesitate to trust yourself with me at a few paces distance, clearly within sight of your men."

"I've got a pard what's in with me in everythin'. What you've got to say I reckon won't spile fur bein' heard by Toby Two-bits."

"I have no objection."

So the three stepped apart.

"Now then," demanded Deadman Dolph, "once more, who be you?"

CHAPTER V.

A DOUBLE PLOT.

"My name is Harold Holland."

"Eh? What! Not the—"

"The same. Of St. Louis."

"It was your father what was wiped out by his cashier?"

"Who was *not* killed by his cashier. And it is that fact which is to make it perfectly safe for you to trust me."

"I don't see it yit."

"You will see it before I am done."

"So it wasn't the jury, then, but them witnesses what was squared? Waal, I wouldn't 'a' believed as five such lunkheads could 'a' been got into one jury-box. I reckon the cashier seen the jury, to offset your seein' the witnesses."

"Neither witnesses or jury were corrupted. The case went through on its merits, as far as the facts were got at."

"An' the facts what wasn't got at?"

"That is what I am about to reveal to you. The cashier, as I have said, was innocent. The story of the burglar was strictly true."

"The deuce it was! An' who was the burglar? You?"

"I? My father's murderer!" cried Holland, starting back with the first betrayal of emotion.

"How did you come to know about it? Why didn't you bring it out at the trial?"

"The burglar was a man in my employ."

Deadman Dolph blew a prolonged whistle of astonishment.

"Waal, that was a go!"

"I had been speculating, as you know, if you followed the trial," pursued Holland. "But I had been doing worse than that. I had been leading a double life; and that takes money. Well, with it all, I had drawn on the bank more deeply than was shown on the investigation. The deficit that was laid to poor Coverleigh's charge was entirely due to me. It was to cover this fact that I employed a professional burglar to rob the bank. He was to have what he got; and it would appear that he had got more than he really found there."

"I knew nothing of my father's intended visit to the bank. You will readily see this, and yet will understand why I accounted for my absence by testifying that I had had a painful scene with him earlier in the day."

"But let me hasten over this. My burglar was caught, and escaped from the building without tampering with the safe. That necessitated the sacrifice of Coverleigh. I had to saddle the deficit upon him, or take it upon myself."

"You see I am making a clean breast of it, and putting myself as much in your power as any of your men are."

"Yes, if you happen to be the man you say you air. But ef this hyar's a cock-an'-bull story, an' you *should* happen—by mistake, ye know!—to be somebody else, an' that somebody else a detective, or a sheriff, whar'd I be?"

"Hear the rest of my story. There is one man alive who suspects that everything in relation to me did not come to the surface in that trial. The one thing that kept him from an investigation that might have unearthed me, was lack of money. He has now the chance to get control of a large fortune, all of which, if necessary, I am sure, will be devoted to vindicating Coverleigh, and so ruining me."

"Now suppose I, with your assistance, plant

that man beside Ozias Stacy? Will you be satisfied that I am the man I claim to be, or at least one who cannot afford to betray you?"

"Yes, I will!"

"That, then, is what I am here for."

"Is the man you're after in this neighborhood?"

"He is somewhere between here and Purcell."

"A boomer?"

"Yes. He sacrificed what money he had—little enough in all conscience—on a detective who did me the favor to sell out to me."

"A crooked lot, them detectives!" laughed Deadman Dolph.

"I suppose they are about like other men—good, bad, and indifferent," answered Holland.

"Well, despairing of accomplishing anything, my enemy came out here, to get a fresh start for himself, and to give Coverleigh's daughter a chance to recover from the effects of what she had passed through, by an entire change of life."

"He had impoverished himself without her knowledge, through the influence of his wife, I fancy, who was greatly attached to Miss Alice. She knew nothing of the secret investigations looking to the vindication of her father, and so was not disappointed at their failure."

"Who is this chap so wonderfully generous?"

"His name is Luke Trask. I expected to find him in company with Stacy. They made the venture together; but Stacy, being unincumbered with women, went on ahead, to steal into the reservation, and get the first pick."

"An' what you want is to bury this hyar Trask?"

"Yes."

"An' what's to do with this money what's comin' to him? His wife will have it, with him out o' the way; an' ef she's so much in love with the girl, she'll spend it the same way."

"His wife is only a woman. It is Trask's energy and shrewdness that I am afraid of. I think he even got an inkling of the fact that the detective had sold him out; only he couldn't prove it."

"The money comes to him by inheritance, I reckon."

"Miss Coverleigh herself is the heiress. It will be her money this time; and you may judge of the readiness with which she will put it at Trask's disposal when he tells her what he purposes to do with it."

"He is a pertinacious dog, and would like nothing better than another try for me, just for the sake of the contest."

At the announcement that the money would come to the girl, Toby Two-bits had given a start which might have set Holland to thinking, if he had seen it.

Toby now took part in the negotiation for the first time.

"I say *go!* if you leave it to me. But I 'low you've got some money down?"

"I have five hundred dollars which I can put my hands on when I know that Luke Trask is out of the game."

"He's a dead man!" declared Toby, determinedly.

"He's a dead man ef I say so!" interposed Dolph, with sullen resentment of this presumption.

"Here," said Holland, hastening to close this breach between his allies, "is a hundred dollars to close the bargain."

And he placed the money in Captain Deadman's hand.

"It's a whack," said Dolph. "But it's only fair to tell you as you hain't closed my eye yit. When you've helped to plant Luke Trask, I'll trust ye, but till then, ef you go to cuttin' the dirt from under my feet, you'll git a hole through ye, as sure as shootin'." You hyear me?"

"That is satisfactory," answered Holland, carelessly. "But now there is one thing more. The girl, Miss Coverleigh, is in my way."

Once more Toby Two-bits gave an eager start. He began to rub his hands nervously, while his eyes glowed with greedy intensity, as he hung upon Holland's words.

"The girl!" cried Dolph. "You're goin in wholesale!"

"My need is apparent. Of course, with money, she can employ lawyers and detectives without Trask's prompting."

"That's so. Then, ef I was you, I'd strike at the king-pin first. Ef she's removed, Trask won't git no money, an' he won't be nowhar."

"He has the suspicion. I do not think that he has communicated it to her yet. I shall not rest easy till I have secured him."

"All right. You kin go fur him first—tryin' yer 'prentice hand, so to speak—an' then polish her off in good shape."

Holland shuddered at the cold-blooded care-

lessness of the villain who made murder such an ordinary piece of business.

"Here is where I need you most," he said. "If it had been Trask only, I might have disposed of him without your aid. I do not wish to participate directly in the removal of the girl, nor do I wish to be an actual witness of it. Let me know that she is—is no longer to be feared, and I will double your money."

But Deadman Dolph began to wake to the fact that there was more in this than he had supposed. To pay for the planting of an enemy was one thing; but when there was money in question, it might be a speculation in which the projector could well afford to come down handsomely. So he said, with the cool effrontery of one who cares nothing for pledges:

"Thribble it, pard, or we throw up the bull business. An' we're lettin' you off dog cheap at that, I reckon."

"The girl has a small leathern sachel which she carries with a strap over one shoulder. Get me that and its contents; get me also, as evidence that you have really captured her, a trinket which she wears over her heart, suspended about her neck by a simple string of black ribbon; and I will make it, in all, fifteen hundred dollars."

"Done!" cried Deadman Dolph again. "An' we're to bury her in the quicksand?"

"Yes. Do not mutilate her more than is unavoidable. Let it be a shot that will produce instant death, or a blow on the head."

Holland seemed to have some compunctions about this part of his villainy; but he went on quite coolly:

"That settled, I guess it's about time I had some sleep."

And he went and lay down, to fall into a sound sleep almost as soon as his eyes closed.

"He's a cool one!" declared Captain Deadman.

"An' a sharper," assented Toby Two-bits.

"But we'll git away with him, all the same."

"Git away with him?"

"Say, Dolph—be you 'lowin' to plant this hyar Trask?"

"You bet yer sweet life I be!"

"An' then what?"

"An' then nothin'."

"You're 'lowin' to pocket this feller's rocks, an' clear out?"

"I ain't 'lowin' nothin' else."

"Waal, I be."

"The deuce you be! An' what be you 'lowin'?"

"I'm 'lowin' to grease my ole hide so's more rocks'n you ever see will stick to it, before I let up on this hyar snoozer."

"I'd like to know how you're 'lowin' to work it."

"Nothin' easier in life. Be you in?"

"O' course I'm in, if thar's anythin' to be made. Share an' share alike."

"You're mighty quick with your share-an'-share-alike when I'm runnin' the mint! How is it with that thar hundred dollars what you've salted down in your pocket so deep it's a miracle you hain't pushed a hole through the bottom of it?"

"You'll git your divvy with the rest o' the boys. Be you 'lowin' to skin them?"

"No, I ain't."

This was a very clever thrust of Deadman Dolph's. It put his colleague apparently in the wrong, and left him so dazed that he called for no further assurance that that had been Dolph's plan from the first.

Meekly enough he proceeded to develop his own plot.

"How many rocks is this hyar girl goin' to fall heir to, do you reckon?"

"How should I know?"

"Waal, what's to hinder our hitchin' on to her ladyship, an' squeezin' some of the gilders out of her, hey?"

"Great Caesar's ghost!"

"You bet, pardner! Ain't that an idee worth two o' yourn?"

"Putt'er thar, Toby! I always know'd you had a head on your shoulders! Blast my two eyes into one, but we'll rake the bottom of that skillet tell thar ain't enough fat left in it to grease a pair o' boots with! The only question is, how's the thing to be done? Sandpaper your topknot, pard, so's thar won't be two hairs fur an idee to run to cover in!"

It was evident that Captain Deadman was a good deal of a diplomat. The next best thing to having bright ideas yourself, is showing a hearty appreciation of them in another.

Being made well pleased with himself, Toby Two-bits was easily persuaded that his colleague was a very clever fellow.

He at once proceeded to polish up his ideas, if not their container, for the wily flatterer's benefit.

"How much money have you got, all told? That snoozer in the quicksands must 'a' been purty well heeled."

This was the first hint from Toby that their relations must henceforth be of a more open basis.

But Deadman Dolph could not forego his natural greed all at once. So he answered, with affected carelessness:

"I hain't sized it up yit. Time enough when we come to divvy. I don't reckon it'll make any of us independent fur life."

"We won't have no more time than we've got now," insisted Toby, quietly, yet with a sort of dogged firmness of purpose that made his comrade look at him keenly. "An' we'll have to sow some o' them rocks, ef we're calculatin' to reap the harvest o' this hyar heiress."

"How's that, I'd like to know?" growled Dolph.

"Let's see ef you've got pile enough, an' I'll tell ye."

There was no reasonable way out of this; yet Dolph hesitated.

At last he resolved to make the most of what was left him.

"Look-a-hyar, Toby," he said, dropping into a confidential tone, "the boys stands their share o' the racket, an' it's understood as they gits their share o' the plunder; an' that's all right. But ef it wasn't fur me an' you, they wouldn't be nowhar—you know that. We furnish the head-pieces fur this hyar undertakin'."

"Waal, so fur so good!"

"But what ef we drop on to a leetle mite extra, what nobody wouldn't calcalate on? That's our good luck, I say. The boys comes in fur their share o' the reg'lar pickin's, all in the way o' business; but this hyar find was outside. Ef it hadn't been fur that leetle game o' poker, we wouldn't 'a' had a smell of it, none of us."

"Now, s'pose we'd gone into a saloon, an' had that game? Would the boys 'a' claimed cahoots? I reckon not. They wouldn't 'a' got it ef they did! Then what right have they got to it now?"

"To be sure, we kin give 'em a taste, to keep 'em from kickin', bein's as they know we've got it. But, between you an' me, I reckon it's a bigger haul than they have any idea of. An' so—ah—what's the reason we can't keep the heft of it between ourselves?"

Many words darken counsel! When a man goes all around Robin Hood's barn to get at a point, rest assured he is trying to straighten out the kinks in a piece of crookedness.

Toby Two-bits felt this, if he didn't put the thought into quite the same form.

"So the snoozer was layin' fur to gull me along o' the rest, was he?" he reflected, while Deadman Dolph was struggling to put a plausible face on his actions. "But I've fetched him, blast him! an' ef he gits away with me after this, it'll be because he gits up airlier than I do."

However, his righteous indignation at Dolph's devious ways was entirely limited to his own interests. As he was now coming in for his share of the plunder, he fell in with Dolph's next argument.

"Ef the things all split up, thar won't be enough apiece to do anybody any good; but it'll fix you an' me purty well."

"The boys looks out fur their own mutton, the same as I do," answered Toby. "I may fetch it into camp, an' help cook it; but I don't cut it up an' put it into their mouths fur 'em, ye onderstand."

"But after this we'll have a squar' deal between you an' me. When we make a haul, we'll both put our noses into the pot at the same time. You play an open game with me, an' it won't cost you nothin' in the end."

"Hain't I always played you straight, Toby?" demanded Dolph, almost pathetically.

"Waal, ye-es," was the reluctant concession.

Dolph swore within himself; but going apart with his colleague, he proceeded to count the money taken from the body of the murdered Ozias Stacy.

"Two thousand dollars!" panted Toby, when he found that the package of bills his partner drew from the breast of his coat reached that sum in round numbers. "He was a fool to fetch that amount o' money into this country with him."

"I reckon he was goin' in fur town lots."

"Waal, we'll go in fur somethin' what'll pay better'n ary town lots in this section, I don't keer whar they be."

"Show up yer investment."

Toby then developed his plan, which will transpire as our story progresses.

Captain Deadman listened to it in outline, and then carefully drew out every detail, adding such suggestions of his own as occurred to him.

In the end he struck hands with his confederate, exclaiming:

"We'll go our pile blind. Let's see who's got the gall to straddle it!"

He then called his men together, and announced that he had a greater scheme on hand than any they had hitherto proposed to themselves, but that it would take longer to realize on it. He gave them the plot in the rough; and the prospect of hazardous adventure and the spice of romance it contained won their enthusiastic concurrence, perhaps quite as much as the prospect of gain.

In the morning they made their way back toward the Canadian, and along its banks in the direction of Purcell, till they fell in with Luke Trask and his party.

Harold Holland was so effectually disguised that he had no fear of recognition; so he rode boldly up with the rest, indistinguishable from the ordinary subordinates of Deadman Dolph.

Alice Coverleigh's pathetic beauty appealed strongly to him, as he saw her seated beside Mrs. Trask in the tilted wagon.

He had always admired her; but never before had she seemed so lovely to him as now.

Grief had spiritualized her face; but a subtle something else had come into it since yesterday.

It was this that had added its last mysterious charm, a brooding shyness in the violet eyes, a tender appeal in the nether lip, as it fell tremulously apart from its fellow when, gazing dreamily into the distance, she inadvertently caught herself in a sigh.

"But for the barrier between us of my persecution of her father, she would be a tempting morsel to woo—she and her fortune," reflected Holland.

Meanwhile Captain Deadman had accosted Luke Trask with a direct, businesslike manner which completely hid the snare he was spreading for his unwary feet.

CHAPTER VI.

A SHARP DICKER.

"WAAL, neighbor, how's how?" was the apparently frank salute of the plotter.

"I find myself well," answered Luke, heartily.

"How air you?"

"Bad!" declared Dolph, with the dejection of a disappointed man. "I've had dog's luck, an' that's a fact."

"I'm sorry fur you, pardner. Ef I could help you out, I'd be glad to give you a lift."

"Thank you kindly. But I reckon you can't put me in no better shape, unless you kin yank me to Purcell an' back between now an' sundown. Ef you don't mind our sharin' your noonin' with ye, we'll take the thing as cheerful as we kin."

"You're welcome to that, sartain. We've got grub a plenty, thank the good Lord; an' grub ain't no good only fur sp'ilin'. Fall to, boys! The more, the merrier!"

"But, I say, pardner, you hain't see an outfit nowhar along beyand, jest a man all alone by himself, drivin' a rattlin' good mule team? His name is 'Zias Stacy, ef so be you might 'a' spoke him."

"Nary sich," answered Dolph, positively. "But he may be further up the stream. We struck this blasted river only a mite further up; an' we struck a bad dose when we did strike it!"

"What's the row with the river?" asked Luke, with sympathetic interest.

"Waal, between me an' you, pardner, we was 'lowin' to git an even chance with a lot more what have got their pile to git over yan."

Luke winked and grinned knowingly.

"Say no more! I've got moral scruples ag'in' it myself!"

"Waal, I wish't I'd started out with a few, or with sense enough to close the eyes o' the U. S. A. with shimplasters, instead o' tryin' to scuttle away from 'em. I'd be a blame good outfit in pocket ef I had."

"You've been cleaned out?"

"You bet."

"But how's that? They can't no more'n kick you out o' the Territory."

"Waal, I wa'n't hankerin' to be booked to make trouble in the future, maybe. I've got my eye on the purtiest bit o' land what lays out-doors; an' when I git my hooks on it, I don't want nothin' shaky about the title."

"Do you reckon they'll enforce that thar regulation? Thar's loud talk about it before-hand; but ef they put er through, thar'll be a

lot o' forfeiture. Them woods is full o' boomers, an' I know it. With thousands o' men in the same boat, thar'll be sich tall kickin', that I reckon the Government 'll git sore eyes winkin' at some shady spots in the settlement o' Oklahoma."

"I wasn't takin' no chances. I 'lowed ef I wasn't ketched on the ground, it 'u'd take some purty hard swearin' to prove anythin' ag'in' me. So when I seen the sodgers, I scooted fur all I was worth. They run me clean into the river. It was make or break; so I put my horns down an' went fur it. I got bu'sted, an' that's all thar is to it!"

"That's hard lines, neighbor, as sure as ye live."

"I've buried in that thar blasted river bottom—I reckon it's gone clean through to Chiny!—as good an outfit as ever come into this country. One hoss I saved by sheer luck—the comin' away of a whiffletree as the wagon went over; but the other—a better one by all odds—has gone to Kingdom Come—bad luck go with him!"

"That's hard! But, say, neighbor, you don't mean to tell me as this hyar was yestiddy afternoon?"

"It was, all the same."

"Waal, I'm blowed!"

And Luke fell to laughing.

"You will excuse me," he said. "I ain't laughin' at your misfortune. But you've took a load off my stomach, I kin tell ye!"

"I'm glad to hear that, ef it's any good to ye."

"It is, so! Now, ef you'll take it in confidence, I'm a mite interested in an enterprise o' this kind myself. Them soldier fellers, ef you'll believe it, camped with me last night."

"The deuce they did!"

"Yes. An' you're in luck to miss 'em on your way down hyar. They come over on this side to hunt you; an' I reckon they've passed you within yellin' distance."

"They're off their base! They hain't no right to hunt me all over creation."

"That's so. I reckon they only wanted to git a squirt at you fur future reference. But I don't 'low as they'll lose much time chasin' the fox as was in the hen-roost, when they've got their hands full with them what's in thar yit."

"But what I sot out to say is, when I hyeared their story, I was afeard it was 'Zias Stacy as they had been runnin'. To be sure the men in your party couldn't be all him; but I didn't 'low but what he might 'a' picked up a party somewhere."

"So I was laughin' to think o' that blasted 'Zias's luck. Ef thar's ary thing what kin be skun through, you bet your life it takes jest him to skin through it!"

"He's tryin' the last run o' his luck, a-skinnin' through the gates o' Paradise, by this time!" reflected Deadman Dolph, without a change in the expression of his iron face.

Nor did any disturbance appear in his voice as he said:

"I don't say as I'd like to have his luck, which the same he may need it all before ever he gits a clean title in Oklahoma; but I do say as it was nobody's luck but my own what took me into that blasted country, an' brung me out of it the way I come."

"What be you 'lowin' to do to make yourself good, ef it's a fair question?"

"I kin go to Purcell an' buy up another outfit; or I kin let it alone. But a neap o' good it'll do me by that time," answered Dolph, in the tone of a man exasperated by disappointment.

"Thar's heaps o' time," said Luke, encouragingly.

"Maybe so, an' maybe not. But I'd rather plank a hundred dollars then chance it—yes, two hundred. Thar'd be oceans o' time ef I didn't have the soldiers to dodge. But what good did time do me yistiddy? Ef I turn about, an' go right in thar now, this very night, I might stand some show."

"Say, Dolph!" here broke in Toby Two-bits.

"Say it yerself," answered Captain Deadman, with apparent irritation.

"I say I've got an idee."

"I hope you'll hang on to it. Ef it pans out like your last, it will bury us in that thar river bottom alongside o' that hoss an' wagon."

"Did I make the river bottom? An' maybe you'd druther waited fur the soldiers—"

"Waal! waal! waal! out with it without so much chin! The thing'll be maggotty with age before you git round to it."

This was a very natural quarrel in appearance, and served to forestall any suspicion of prearrangement in what was to follow.

Toby answered, sulkily:

"What's the reason we couldn't buy out some outfit nearer than Purcell?"

"What's the reason we couldn't buy out Oklahoma?" growled Dolph, like a man blinded by anger to the advantages of a suggestion coming from one at whom he was irritated.

"It would pay us to make it an object fur somebody what's willin' to wait outside, to go to Purcell in place of us."

"Waal, that's so," admitted Dolph. "But we've got that somebody to find."

"Money'll fetch 'most anythin' in this world. Maybe we could make a dicker with this hyar gent. He's got jest what we want; an' we could stand him to make day's wages between hyar an' Purcell, while he hain't got nothin' else to do."

Dolph looked at Luke as if this were a new thought.

"Ef you'd do that, pardner, we could pull out o' hyar in an hour's time."

"I'm purty well fixed," answered Luke. "I reckon I'll hold on to what I've got. A fair chance at this thing is worth as much to me as to any man."

But, seeing this way out of his difficulties, Deadman Dolph was not to be turned from his purpose so easily.

"I'll tell you what it is, stranger," he said, drawing a well-filled buckskin bag from his pocket. "This hyar thing is worth a homestead to you. I reckon you can't git no more out of it. But I've got a party of men with me what kin afford to put up somethin' toward the buyin' of a homestead, rather than run the risk o' gittin' euchered out o' the snap we're after."

"Jest you look at the thing this way. Hyar you've got to wait till the Territory's opened. Your expenses is goin' on, an' you ain't makin' a cent. Now, what's the reason it wouldn't pay you to put in this time gittin' another outfit, an' salt down the balance? I'll make it what you say—anythin' in reason. I expect to pay you fur further trouble."

"It ain't the trouble," objected Luke, holding off. "It's the risk. I'm solid now. I've hyeard o' folks playin' hog, tryin' to git two chaws at one bite, an' gittin' nary one!"

"But look a' hyar. You kin make yerself good, an' have lots o' time. It ain't two minutes sence you said so yerself."

"That's so. I might find a pick-up at Purcell. But I'm fixed jest to my notion—"

"Hold on! What is it we want? Not your stock, nor your tools, nor your seed. We don't want nothin' what you've got, only jest enough to keep soul an' body together till we kin make our claim good. We want provisions an' a team to carry 'em in. Can't you duplicate them in Purcell?"

"Maybe I kin."

"O' course you kin! An' now don't think as I want you to do this hyar fur nothin'. Set yer price; only treat me like a Christian."

Luke Trask had one foible. Harold Holland had indicated it, when he said that Luke would delight in another opportunity to try conclusions with him, in the effort to shift the odium from the shoulders of the dead cashier to those of the real criminal. He did like to contend for victory in any sort of a contest. When it came to a sharp dicker, he was in his element.

"Waal," he said, "Christian, or no Christian, I reckon one man likes a bargain about as well as another. I don't pretend to sell you this kit fur what it's worth. The question is, what is the accommodation worth to you?"

Up to this point no one had interfered, though the negotiation was conducted in the hearing of every one not more interested in his dinner than in what was going on at his elbow.

Alice Coverleigh had conceived a vague dislike for Deadman Dolph, when she learned that he was the man of whom Charley Foraker and his friends had been in pursuit. Being a woman, her interest in an individual was much closer than her sympathy with a party; and though she was a boomer, she was heart and soul in favor of the soldiers, as against this particular trespasser. So she hoped that he would not succeed in getting the means to carry out his plans.

Mrs. Trask, a woman also, had a woman's suspicion of trading. She believed in letting well-enough alone.

"I wouldn't try to better a good thing ef I was you, Luke Trask," she interposed, seeing that her husband was inclining to the trade.

Now Luke, albeit with a fair opinion of his wife's shrewdness, and often led by her, had a man's repugnance to being "run," especially in the observation of others.

"I reckon I've got head enough fur this hyar, ef you'll trust me, Mrs. Trask," he answered,

with that formality with which husbands sometimes repel wifely suggestion.

And he turned toward Deadman Dolph with a business-like air of determination.

"It's worth five hundred dollars," said Dolph, replying to the question put to him.

"It's worth fifteen," amended Luke, without a moment's hesitation.

"Fif—teen—hundred—dollars!" ejaculated Dolph, half rising from his seat, in that affectation of unbounded astonishment which every trader knows is one of the maneuvers in that trial of wits in which the man with the most assurance generally succeeds in bluffing his opponent into submission.

"Fur the first pick o' the land," explained Luke, with a bland smile.

"But fifteen hundred dollars!" protested Dolph.

"Sixteen," corrected Luke, quickly.

"But you said fifteen."

"Seventeen—I should have said seventeen."

"But you agreed on—"

"Eighteen. I don't care to take it even at eighteen. You see, though it may not be worth more than eighteen to you, I wouldn't be to all this bother for less than—"

"Done! Hold on! I've got you! Eighteen hundred. Hyar's yer money, before you git a chance to make another raise on me!"

Dolph spread out his—or rather Ozias Stacy's—money, with the eagerness of a man who sees a rare opportunity on the point of slipping through his fingers.

Luke Trask smiled with delight.

He even turned his laughing eyes toward his wife, with a challenge to her disapproval in them.

He got it, in a form that was unexpected to him.

"Waal, Luke Trask," she said, "ef I'd made up my mind to do a neighborly turn, I wouldn't skin a man alive like that a-doin' of it!"

"Business is business!" chuckled Luke, sententiously.

"Thar won't no good come o' no sich business as that—you mark my words!" predicted Mrs. Trask.

"I'll risk it," returned Luke, as he rolled up the bills, and put them into his pocket.

To Dolph he said:

"You take the hosses an' wagon, an' the provisions, barrin' enough fur my folks to live on till I git back from Purcell."

"You'll find me a fair man to deal with," returned Deadman Dolph. "Take out what fodder you think you want. I've got a better bargain than I git every day, any way ye kin fix it."

He seemed highly delighted with his repaired prospects, and in a generous mood.

Luke was not to be outdone in disinterestedness.

"I reckon my wife will know about what we want," he said; "an' havin' been treated to her ideas on business honesty, you won't be afraid as she'll take more'n we're fairly entitled to."

"I'll trust the lady, an' never look to see what she takes, ef she only takes enough," answered Dolph.

"Meanwhile I'll trouble you to make out an acknowledgment o' this hyar transaction, so's I'll be able to show how I come by these hyar, ef thar's ever any question raised. An' it won't hurt to have a name or two as witnesses."

While Luke was executing this formality, Mrs. Trask proved that she was to be trusted, with the prospect of injustice to nobody but herself.

With the extreme solicitude of a woman who is used to higgling over the price of butter and eggs, and looking sharp after the tally of the rag and soap-grease men, she would have called Dolph's attention to each article she had selected, and explained to him the absolute indispensability of it. But waving this aside with the assurance that it was all right, he won her respect and admiration by adding to her stock some delicacies that she had scrupled about taking, though it made her housekeeper's heart ache to let them go.

"You're a gentleman!" she declared: "an' Luke has used you shameful. Ef you ever come anigh our house after we git things to rights, I hope you'll make free to drop in on us to dinner or to tea, any time."

"You better b'lieve I will, ma'am," was Dolph's assurance. "I hope we'll be nigh neighbors."

So, with mutual satisfaction the traders parted, Deadman Dolph and his men returning up-stream, while Luke Trask only waited to put his people into comfortable camp before setting out for Purcell.

"An' now," said Deadman Dolph, when they were well away from observation, "to git that money back, an' plant that blame hog!"

To Harold Holland he said:

"I reckon me an' you will be enough fur him. He'll go alone, so's not to leave his family unpertected. He won't be countin' on danger to 'em; but he'll want to leave 'em feelin' easy."

Taking Toby Two-bits aside for a last word, Dolph asked:

"You spotted her?"

"You bet."

"An' you 'low as you kin fetch her?"

"I've got to chance a good deal. You know that as well as I do. I may not drop her the first try; but I'll stick to her till she comes away—you bet your life on that."

"You do your work as well as I do mine, an' we'll make a raise out o' this yit. His nibs must have a pile o' rocks salted down some'rs. These hyar bank fellers don't br'ist up without featherin' their nest fur a soft an' warm place to tumble into, ag'in' the chance o' their gittin' ten years or such a matter in Cross-bar Hotel! We might 'a' squeezed a bigger stake out o' him while we was about it; but ef we have two cows to milk in the future, it'll be all right."

He then took his departure in company with Harold Holland; and shortly afterward Toby Two-bits also left the wagon, with one of the best men of the party as a backer.

CHAPTER VII.

A GOOD MAN DOWN.

As they rode away from those whose presence was enough to protect him from treachery, Deadman Dolph looked at his companion sharply and remarked:

"I ain't trustin' you yet, you onderstand; no more I won't, till I see you put a bullet through that snoozer with your own hand."

"You will see that I do not hesitate to avail myself of the first opportunity to do so," Harold assured him.

"I'll believe it when I see it. Meanwhile I trust myself to keep you from cuttin' the dirt from under my feet. But it's only fair to warn you that I'd jest as leave put a hole through you as any other man, ef you do the slightest thing that looks crooked."

"Please remember that I am running the risk of your mistakes."

"You'll have to resk that sartain. But you needn't be afeard. I've watched sprier men than you be; an' I reckon I know most o' the signs when a galoot is climbin' fur his gun. You jest keep yer paws away from them shootin'-irons, an' you're solid."

"Fur the rest, I hain't got nothin' ag'in' you; an' thar's plenty o' room in this hyar world fur both of us, ef you're doin' the squar' thing by me. As fur detectives, an' sheriffs, an' sich, them tarant'lars I do despise!"

"I'll trouble you to ride say a neck ahead o' me; an' that'll guard ag'in' accidents."

It was plain that Dolph did not mean to be the victim of a flank movement, if human precaution could protect him against it.

Holland rode as required without protest.

Making a detour, they passed far enough from the camp of the Trask party to run no risk of being discovered, and then bore toward the river, to gain a position where they would be likely to intercept Luke on his way to Purcell, a well-known town in what is called the Chickasaw Nation.

All of this country was thoroughly familiar to Deadman Dolph. For years he had prowled about, living the devious life of a vagabond of the border.

To be able to bestride a mustang, with wonderful trappings of stamped leather, which he might call his own, by however shady methods procured; to keep himself plentifully supplied with weapons, ammunition, tobacco and whisky; to "make a raise" now and again at gambling, and then array himself in the gorgeous attire that always signalizes flush times with a borderman—these had been the ambitions of his life.

Add to this that in the bars, and much more in the dance-houses so often attached to them, he posed as a "bad man."

The attraction of this sort of life is like that of the savage, the excitement of pitting his wits against those of all he came in contact with, and like the savage he knew his haunts by heart.

"Thar ain't no better country than this hyar fur a still hunt," he remarked. "It's like good bacon—a streak o' fat an' a streak o' lean. You run to cover in a bit o' timber, an' thar you lay an' watch ther perairer fur your meat to walk up an' git salted. Ef these hyar woods could

talk, they'd tell a tale to make yer ha'r raise an' yer heart go down into yer boots. I hain't roamed this hyar section year out an' year in, without seein' what I see! I've slung my meat cold myself, an' I've been ketched in a bad hole in my turn. I've got scars on my body what won't wear out ef I live till the Day o' Judgment; but I've sent a snoozer or two to the happy huntin'-grounds fur to pick out a front seat fur me, an' hold it ag'in I show up. I don't believe in a man's blowin' his own bazoo, but I've been thar, you bet!"

And with this introduction he proceeded to beguile the way with an assortment of blood-curdling yarns, in all of which he was the central figure, which he had told so often that he had long since got fact hopelessly involved with fiction. For some of them there was, of course, a truthful foundation. More than once in his adventurous career had the question of his longer cumbering the earth turned upon the slenderest chance.

The law of survival in the lives of these men is about like that of the casting of a die. Here one is a little quicker on the trigger, there one whose assurance or dominating will overawes really better men; and these advantages serve them for a time. But it is the old story of the jug that went too often to the well. In the end they all "knock under" the same way. Treachery or a chance ball finds them, and they pass out.

Selecting his ambuscade, Deadman Dolph secreted their horses in the midst of the motte, and then took up a position on the border toward the northwest.

"Ef our mutton sot out as soon as he conveniently could, which the same he wouldn't be likely to make no closer calculations than he had to, we hain't more'n an hour the better of him; an' thet's jest about what we've got before sundown."

"Now it don't stand to reeson as I kin keep my weather eye peeled on you, an' at the same time be on the lookout fur Luke Trask. So I'll have to trouble you to put them weepens whar they won't be all the while beggin' o' ye to git the drop on me, till the time comes fur you to put a skylight in his topknot. Then you'll arm up ag'in, an' I'll keep at your back while you go fur him wicked."

Holland disarmed himself as readily as he had complied with all of Dolph's exactions.

He seemed to be much more interested in something which was floating through his mind, an appearance which was confirmed by his next words.

"I have been thinking of something which I did not forecast. This is so far from the Canadian that we shall not care to risk detection by carrying the body across the open country to the quicksands."

"That's so," assented Dolph. "But we won't git no better place to leave it than right hyar."

"And our trail hence? Suppose the body is discovered, and we are followed?"

"I'd be a blank fool ef I went about the country killin' men, an' then blazed my trail fur Judge Lynch to foller! I reckon I hain't crept all over this country on my hands an' knees a'most, without findin' spots whar I kin blind a hoss track so's it'll lose the best man they kin put on to me."

"You are confident of that?"

"I'm goin' my pile on it—my life."

No greater assurance than this could be demanded, and so they settled down to their watch.

Would their victim walk unwarned into the trap?

Dolph was right in his forecast of Luke Trask's probable movements.

Mrs. Trask would have had him wait till the morrow before setting out; but he said no.

"I may have to skirmish about Purcell a mite before I find what I want: an' I reckon I better make the most o' the time before me. I kin make a neat little spell before sundown; an' with the full moon we've got, I may take a notion to add a stretch durin' the night."

"I say, Luke," said his wife, "I don't like the idee o' your goin' prowlin' around the country alone with all that money on ye."

"Nonsense! Who knows as I've got any money? Hain't I got *busted* wrote all over me? I'm so well anigh a scarecrow, a respectable tramp wouldn't trade duds with me. Besides, while my pockets was bein' turned inside out, do you reckon I'd be sayin' *thank you, kindly*?"

And Luke laughed at the reception to his assailants he pictured in his imagination.

"Take Jim with you, then," suggested his wife.

"An' leave you an' Allie hyar with nobody

but the boy to look after ye? Not as I 'low as you will have any particular use fur even the boy. But you'll feel easier with Jim."

So he went his way, leaving his wife gazing wistfully after him.

Well mounted, he covered the ground at a good round pace, reflecting with a well-satisfied smile on the snug little sum he would have left after making his former provision.

"This hyar's a good beginnin'. I've grubbed many a day without turnin' such an honest penny. I reckon I'll git Mary the makin' of a new dress, so's she'll have somethin' to remember that things don't always run into the ground when she hain't the bossin' of 'em."

He chuckled gleefully at this way of marking his triumph.

"An' thar's the best girl that'll show up in Oklahoma fur a purty considerable spell, I'm thinkin'," he continued, alluding, of course, to Alice. "I'll find her some gimcrack, or another. Girls never gits too much in the way o' beautifiers. Not as she needs anythin' as Natur' hain't provided her with a'eady, God bless her! It's a blasted shame to bury her out in this country, when with anythin' of a show she's fitten to circulate with the best of 'em."

"But wouldn't it be a go, though, ef she'd struck her luck the same time I done mine? Not as the luck 'u'd be any more on her side than on his'n. But he's as likely a chap, to my eye, as she'll have a chance o' strikin' out hyar, 'less it might be one o' the officers at Fort Reno. But she'd better git a man what'll give her a stiddy home, than one o' them trampin', trompin', travelin', troopin' hyar-to-day-an'-thar-to-morrers. He has the style about him, an' that's a fact; an' he froze to her from the minute he sot his eyes on her."

"Ef he gits her, we'll lose her—that's flat. It'll be rough on Mary, who sets a heap by her; an' I'd give her keep, an' a trifle a year besides, to keep her with us always. But ef she gits a first-class chance to set up in life fur herself, it ain't fur us to stand in her light—God bless her ag'in, say I!"

Wondering what he should get her—it must be something that would show his appreciation of her beauty—he rode on, till the declining sun drew his attention to the fact that his dinner had been "shaken down into nothin'," as he expressed it.

"I'll go to that thar motte—thar's more'n like a spring thar, to jedge from the scraps an' jags o' bresh what goes stragglin' away toward the Canadian—an' camp down fur three or four hours. Then, ef I feel like it, I'll push on by moonlight fur a spell. I have got a hole in my corporosity, an' that's a fact. This perairie air does make big feeders!"

He rode up to the motte, dismounted, removed the saddle from his horse's back, and staked the animal out to graze. Then throwing the saddle over his shoulder, he walked in among the trees.

The sun had sunk below the horizon. The chill dampness of nightfall was in the air. Not a sound warned him that he was not the sole occupant of the mid-prairie chaparral.

Everything had happened exactly as Deadman Dolph had forecast. From his eyrie in a treetop, he discovered the approach of his victim while yet at a great distance.

Slipping to the ground, he cried eagerly:

"We've got him! He's alone, an' makin' straight fur the motte. He must know o' this spring. Now, pardner, you kin strap them weepens on to you as quick as you've a mind to. But don't yu disremember that I'm at your back with a cocked revolver tell you've plugged him."

Holland resumed his weapons, but it was noticeable that he was very pale.

"You ain't gon' to crawfish?" demanded Dolph, gazing at him. "You do look white-livered, fur a fact."

"I don't kill a man every day," replied Harold. "Isn't it natural that I should display some little emotion on such an occasion?"

"Maybe it is; but you'd better save yer conscience tell after the job's done. I'll make this thing as easy fur you as I kin; but you'd better not go back on me at the last minute. When the scratch comes, you've got to plug, or be plugged, ye onderstand!"

"There is no danger of my failin'."

"This hyar's the way we'll work it. He'll picket his hoss yonder, an' then he'll come in hyar fur to build his fire. Hyar's the cover whar we'll be, you thar, an' me hyar. Then, jest as he's comin' under the trees, you let daylight through him; an' the thing's done."

"That will leave him not the ghost of a show," observed Harold, uneasily.

Deadman Dolph, who, if he had ever had any

magnanimous scruples, had long since outlived them, did not catch the import of the words, and so replied:

"Nary ghost, only his own ghost. But thar's jest one chance o' his gittin' warnin'; an' that comes to me in time to cut it off."

"What is that?"

"The hosses."

"I had forgotten them. You are afraid that they will whinny if they get the wind of his animal?"

"That's jest it, pardner."

"What is to be done?"

For Harold so soon swung back to the cowardly desire to take his victim at a fatal advantage.

"We'll muzzle 'em."

And this scheme was carried out without delay.

The horses were carried to the further side of the motte, and there thrown down and bound, after which their jaws were so securely tied together that they could not have cropped a spear of grass.

Then the precious pair of waylayers went to their posts, and all became quiet.

The sun sunk below the horizon; the short prairie twilight waned rapidly. In the gathering dusk, it was already so dark in the shadow of the trees, that the murderers could almost have stood boldly forth without the fear of being discovered, though any one entering from the open prairie was plainly visible, presenting the best mark imaginable.

So Luke Trask went to his fate. Just as he was passing from the light to the darkness there was a flash, a sharp report, and a thrill that set every nerve to tingling.

For one breathless instant he stood stock still. In that instant there flashed before his imagination a picture like a lightning-illuminated landscape.

He saw himself lying stark in death, and his wife kneeling beside his body with a look of horror and hopeless woe on her face, while Alice clung to her with the instinct of consolation, but helpless in her fear.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THE NIGHT HUNT ENDED.

THE agony of the instant which told Luke Trask that the happiness or misery of his loved ones hung upon his address, seconding his good fortune, fired him with an energy such as men develop only in the face of some mighty issue.

If premeditated at all, his actions were so swift that they left no impression of planning on his mind.

Swinging the saddle before him, to serve as a shield from the next bullet, he leaped into the shadows toward the left, casting himself flat on the ground the instant he reached a clump of undergrowth which would offer him shelter.

Dropping the saddle as he sunk to the ground, the hunted man glided rapidly from covert to covert, now creeping, now rolling, but ever making his way farther and further into the shadows, which were his one hope.

In that brief passage, two more flashes and reports showed the determination of his enemy; while two shocks, one of which sent an icy thrill through him, the other scattering splinters of the saddle in his face, were proof of the fatal accuracy of his aim.

"After him! after him!" shouted a voice, hoarse with rage. "You've bungled it like a fool! Jump on him, curse him!"

Recognizing the voice of the man with whom he had been bargaining but a few hours before, Trask knew that he had been waylaid with the purpose of murder and robbery.

Then in bitterness of spirit he recalled the warning words of his wife. No good would come of money got in that way!

From the fact of one addressing the other, he knew that his assailants were at least two, while there was every chance that there were more.

Unquestionably they had chosen their spot, and had come in sufficient force to make his capture certain.

Would he ever again see those dependent upon him?

But these thoughts were only a blurred flash of agonized regret. The moment called for action, not vain repining.

A dusky figure came bounding toward him with savage determination.

He stopped, drew his revolver, and fired.

The figure vanished as if it had fallen into a pit.

The yell of pain or rage left him in no doubt as to the effect of his shot.

A voice raised in execration told him that his

most formidable enemy, at least, was alive and unharmed.

"Hold on! It's no use. He's stole a march on us. Crawfish, pard! Thar ain't no good o' jumpin' down the barrel of his shootin'-iron."

Then all was suddenly still.

Balked in their first treacherous assault, the murderers were about to alter their tactics. Henceforth it was to be a game of hide and seek.

Luke Trask lay on his side gasping. He had gained a respite, but what would it profit him?

How badly was he hurt? Was he wounded to the death? Was this the great change stealing over him, this languor, this chill numbness?

But if his wounds were not mortal, how could he escape? It would be impossible to reach his horse without running a gantlet of leaden hail, through which there could be no hope of bearing life away. The prairie grass was too short for him to creep away in it.

If he waited till the morrow's light, his chance would be reduced to nothing.

There was but one hope—a party of strangers passing that way. If he could hide till then, he might make his strait known.

At any rate, he must rest before anything else, and recuperate from the shock of the two bullets that had pierced his flesh.

So he lay, breathing heavily, yet striving not to betray his vicinity by the sound.

It was a good man down!

Meanwhile, Harold Holland lay still where he had fallen.

Deadman Dolph crept cautiously up to him, uncertain whether he was alive or dead.

"The snoozer may be shammin', to trap me," he reflected, unable to cast off his suspicion of Harold, even though he felt sure that he had shot to kill.

It was no time for talk, where the sound of their voices might bring a shot upon them, so Dolph laid hold of his colleague, to see if he was conscious.

Harold gave a violent start, and then recovered himself.

Satisfied at last of his sincerity, Dolph silently drew him away from the spot.

Harold crept after him with extreme difficulty, now and again pausing to lie close upon the ground, and breathe painfully.

"Are you hurt, pard?" whispered Dolph, when they were far enough away not to be overheard.

"No," answered Harold. "Don't bother about me. But the horror of it—oh, the horror of it! He will escape. He will escape. I shall hang for this—or—or that other!"

His voice died away, so that his comrade in crime did not hear his last words.

"You've lost yer grip," he said, almost contemptuously. "But this hyar ain't no time fur whinin'. He ain't out o' this motte yit, not by a darn sight; an' when he does go out, he'll go out cold! You hyear me?"

"But I failed—"

"You fetched him, I tell you. I know when a man gits his reglar dose. I see him squirm twice before he went to the ground. Ef I hadn't been sure of him, I'd 'a' dropped in a mite of a bullet of my own. But I wanted to leave no doubt about your bein' the chap what fetched him."

"But he may be creepin' away even now."

"That's what I'm comin' to. Do you see that moon? He'll never git away from this motte ef he don't give us the slip purty soon. In half an hour it'll be as light as day. As it is, he can't creep away ef we keep our eyes peeled."

"His best chance is on this hyar side, while the shadows air long. But I'll take that in hand."

"Thar's jest one thing more to be looked after first. I'll fix his boss so's he can't git away on him."

"Meanwhile, you creep over to whar our hosses be, so he can't git the bulge on us thar. You don't have to hang around 'em very close. Ef he disturbs 'em, you kin hear it. But keep a sharp lookout over all the perairer you kin see, an' don't let him creep away. I'll watch on this side, an' you on that. Now, git!"

Dolph crept on the other side of a clump of bushes, and lying flat on the ground, leveled his rifle at the horse that was quietly grazing at a little distance.

There was a flash, a ringing report, and with a scream of pain and fear Luke's horse gave a spasmodic bound, and fell all in a heap.

"That's my last chance gone!" groaned Luke, realizing the calamity that had been added to his miseries.

Then all was still as the grave.

The broad silver disk of the moon climbed the heavens, and swept the vast expanse to the western horizon; the new day broke; and not a sound had indicated the progress of that life-and-death struggle.

What were the thoughts of the murderer during that period of waiting?

He had at least one diversion from the immediate contemplation of his deed. He took advantage of his solitude to open his clothing and examine a wound that he had received, and which he had hidden from his confederate.

"If he should learn that I am wounded, he will fear the suspicion that it may bring upon me, and so ultimately upon him, if this should lead to a sharp investigation. The chance is not great, at such a time as this; but he is the sort of a man who would not scruple to make himself secure by leaving me here beside our victim."

"Here dead together!" he reflected, with a shudder.

Such an examination of his wound as he could make, led him to think it not serious.

"It will be painful; but I can endure it for twenty-four hours, till I am sure of the conclusion of my business here, and have got out of his power. After the fatal Monday that is approaching, wounds will be so plenty here in Oklahoma, that no suspicion will be excited by the possession of one or many."

Going to his horse, and tearing a strip from his blanket, he bound it tightly about his body, next to his skin. He could then breathe with less pain.

Luckily his coat had been open, so that it was not perforated; and when this was buttoned over his vest, there was no outward trace of the passage of the bullet.

His ghastly features alone remained to tell the story of suffering. But he might dissemble the cause. A recent murderer is not likely to look rosy with health and happiness.

All night long he lay as quietly as possible, and in the morning he found that he could move much more easily than he had hoped.

Then came Deadman Dolph to him.

"Thar ain't no use waitin' any longer. We've got to rake this chaparral tell we find him, or he finds us. I reckon it's about an even chance which. But, no good will come o' puttin' of it off. Air you ready to take your chance o' goin' to the Hallelujeram a-kitin'?"

"I am ready for anything but a longer protraction of this suspense."

"Waal, that's what I like to hyear. You talk, pardner, a heap sight better'n you look."

"I am not in a very tranquil frame of mind."

"I reckon not!" grinned Dolph. "I've been thar myself, but I always managed to take it coolly, considerin'. I always 'lowed as it was the t'other feller what had the best right to kick."

By "the best right," Dolph meant "the most reason."

"Would it not be well to beat the cover in company?" suggested Harold; "or he may shoot one of us, and leave the other no better off than before he was found."

"That would be a mighty good idee," answered Dolph, "ef we didn't have a dog-gone sight better one."

"What have you to propose?"

"A dog to flush our bird, so's we kin take him on the wing."

"I do not understand you."

"You will, in a minute."

And Dolph went to the horses, and released his own.

"It's made your ole bones ache, ain't it, pard?" he said, patting the animal. "Waal, I had to do it, to keep you from givin' me away. Now I've got to put you through a worse course o' sprouts than that. But you won't know what's up tell you hyear somethin' drap fur the last time, perhaps."

"Ye see," turning to Harold, "all we've got to do is to drive him before us; an' when he comes on to our skulker, he'll show sign."

This plan was carried out, for some time without success; but, as they came round to the scene of conflict of the night before, the horse suddenly stopped with a snort, then threw up his head, and leaped away as if frightened.

"That'll do," declared Dolph, rising boldly to his feet, and speaking without caution.

"What," faltered Harold.

"Come out, pard," said Dolph. "That hoss knows a dead man as well as you or me. He's seen enough of 'em to."

Holland rose to his feet, but, with a sudden pallor, swayed and seized hold of a sapling for support.

"Waal, you're mighty chicken-hearted fur a

feller what takes sich hefty jobs on hand," observed Dolph, scanning him curiously.

"Go and satisfy yourself that he is dead. I do not care to look at him," gasped Harold, turning away. "When I pronounce on him, you kin bury him with as easy a mind as if you had a dozen doctor's certificates in your pocket."

Striding up to the spot whence the horse had started in horror, Dolph looked calmly down upon the set, white face turned up to the daylight.

Luke Trask lay as if asleep. His features were composed, with no trace of pain in them. He was stone dead.

"We've been holdin' an empty bag all night," said Dolph, alluding to a well-known practical joke the victim of which is left in ridiculous expectancy. "He wasn't alive ten minutes after he had his crack at you."

Holland only shuddered and moved dizzily further from the spot, while Dolph coolly despoiled the dead, ascertaining with satisfaction that he had got back all the money he had paid the night before, and a snug little sum in addition.

"Let us get away from here," pleaded Harold, faintly.

"With all the pleasure in life!" responded the other, cheerfully.

"Ought not something to be done toward burying him?" faltered Holland.

"Waal, I swar!" cried Dolph, staring at him as if he began to doubt his entire sanity.

"I can't forget that I gave him no chance for his life! My God! twice! twice! twice!"

What was it he was muttering? Dolph was not sure that he had quite made it out. Holland had spoken unguardedly in his anguish of spirit, yet he had instinctively dropped his voice.

"It sounded as if he said *twice*. Twice what, I'd like to know? He shot at him three times. He hain't looked at him; so he don't know that he only pinked him twice, while the other shot glanced on the saddle. No, he can't mean that. Then, what in Cain does he mean? Twice! twice! twice! Is this the second time he's had a whack at him? No, I reckon he'd 'a' told me. Twice! twi— Great Caesar, ef it could be *that*!"

Dolph stared after the retreating figure of his confederate, who was making his way to where his horse yet lay in his bonds.

"Twice as he's sent somebody through the golden gates without givin' 'em a show! Who was the other one, then? That might well take the heart out of him. But he denied it. O' course, though, he naterally would. Waal, I swar! The thing tallies all round. I'll bet my head it's so! Waal, it ain't none o' my funeral. All I've got to say is, I'm glad I don't sleep inside o' his skin!"

Then they mounted and rode from the fatal spot, while Dolph blinded the trail in a way on which he declared he was willing to risk his professional reputation.

Riding into the camp where he had left his party, he met Toby Two-bits's inquiring look by slapping his hand over the spot where he carried the recovered money, and asked in his turn:

"Waal, pard, what luck?"

CHAPTER IX.

AN ABDUCTION.

AFTER the departure of her husband Mrs. Trask would have gone to Alice Coverleigh, to ease her mind by talking over her anxiety with her. But the girl seemed so free from apprehension that the generous woman felt it would be a pity to disturb her tranquility.

"The pore critter has enough on her mind a'ready, without bein' sot to worry about things that may never happen. I wonder what she's pourin' over now. She keep a-thinkin' an' a-thinkin' an' a-thinkin'. It would be a Lord's mercy ef some great change would come in her life, to take her mind off o' her pore ole father."

"Now, that thar was a mighty likely young man what seemed to be so struck with her last night. Ef she'd take to him an' him to her, it might do her a power o' good. Thar ain't nothin' in this world o' trial an' tribulation like love-makin', fur a general stirrin'-up an' startin' over new."

Then, as her eyes followed the girl fondly, the good woman heaved a sigh, and said:

"The day'll come, sooner or later, when she'll be goin' away from us. I hope to the Lord as it'll be to somebody as'll be a comfort to her. We'll do the best we kin by her while the good Lord leaves her with us; an' then we'll give her up, in His good time, as we do all our blessin's as is only lent."

What was Alice thinking about? At times she seemed immersed in a dreamy melancholy; again she would smile, not with the gayety natural to her youth, but with a sort of shy shamefacedness. From such a reverie she would rouse, and busy herself in some trifling interest with her companions.

When the night fell, bringing with it the serene moonlight, she wandered away from the glare of the camp to the tranquil loveliness of the river-bank.

There she seated herself quite alone, and sought to bring up the thoughts and feelings of the night before.

The scene was the same; but now she had for companionship only her memories.

That they were agreeable memories appeared in the changing expression of her face.

So vivid was her imagination, that she could almost hear again the low manly baritone that had dwelt soothingly in her ears twenty-four hours ago.

In the morning she had felt disappointed. Just what was the matter with his greeting or leave-taking, she could not have said; but all day long there had been moments when a strange sense of desolation crept over her.

But to-night, as she recalled all he had said—nothing very wonderful or wise, but just what she liked to hear—the confidence and content came back.

Though she knew that he was only a guest at Fort Reno, she did not ask herself how long he would stay. She did not think of such a thing as his going back to his Eastern home, or what such a separation might be to her.

He was there! She knew, without his having said so directly, that he would come again. That was enough for the present.

So absorbed was she, with her eyes probing the depths of the star-dight heavens, or following the illusive movement of the moon, as it seemed to sail up! up! up! through a light feathery rack of clouds, that she knew nothing of the occasional shifting of one of the many dark shadows that surrounded her.

It flitted now this way, now that, seeming to seek its denser kindred, so that it was frequently quite lost in them; but at each reappearance it was somewhat nearer to her.

While Deadman Dolph was lying in wait for Luke Trask, Toby Two-bits and his companion had made their way back to the camp where Luke's party awaited his return.

"Our chance, Dick," he said to his companion, "is that she'll go moonin' fur a spell before she turns in fur the night. Thar ain't nothin' like moonlight an' a stretch o' smooth water fur workin' up the feelin's o' young girls. They goes out thar an' looks up at the moon tell they gits melancholy. Then they has a nice miserable time, sighin' an' quotin' poetry about dyin', an' heaven bein' their home, an' this hyar world a vail o' tears whar nobody don't love nobody else. Then, when they've sot out in the damp tell they've laid up the seeds o' rheumatiz in their jints fur old age, an' have got the tic-dulleroo an' the shivers down their backs, they turns in an' puts a ration o' pickles an' mince pie whar it'll do the most good, an' goes to roost like ordinary Christians; an' in the mornin' they goes fur beefsteak an' pertaters jest as if thar wasn't no sich things as moonshines an' flap-doodle."

Not to be behind Toby Two-bits in worldly wisdom, Dick responded briefly that "he'd been thar!"

So these two worthies crept upon the camp shortly after nightfall, watching for their prey like skulking vampires.

Toby had noted the lay of the land during their previous visit, and knew the direction in which Alice would probably go along the river bank.

As if she wished to get away from the sound of voices in the camp, which broke in upon that other voice she was listening to, she went beyond the range of the firelight, though not out of easy ear-shot from her friends.

"This hyar's goin' to be mighty ticklish business," whispered Toby. "We don't want to make no mismoves. One squeal out of her will fetch 'em down on us like bees."

"Thar ain't but one that 'ud amount to anythin'," suggested Dick. "You git the girl; an' ef he comes out hyar, I have him to me."

"I reckon you'd miss it, not countin' the ole woman in. But, anyway, we don't want to do no slaughter-house business hyar. Remember, we've got to make terms with her one o' these days; an' then blood'll be a mighty ugly thing to negotiate. It ain't as if we was 'lowin' to sink her in the quicksands, as that snoozer counts on."

"You'll have a nice job to close his eye."

"We'll look out fur that. But you're sure them hosses is ready? I'm bound to hang to her, ef I git my hooks onto her once. Thar's millions in it, I tell you!"

"It won't hurt to knock this hyar galoot on the head. I'll do it so's not to hurt him. We'll have to quiet him some way, ef he drops to us."

"Belt him over the topknot, ef you have to. Now lay low. Keep whar you kin help me ef I need it. I'm goin' to try to creep up on her."

Standing in the shadow of a tree, Toby held up a blanket by two corners, letting it fall straight before him. Then, having gathered it in transverse folds, so that he could drop it again by simply loosening his hold in part, he crouched low, and began to creep upon his prey.

Flitting noiselessly from coppice to coppice, he drew nearer and nearer till he was almost within arm's reach of the unconscious girl.

Then he rose, dropping a part of his blanket, so that it fell about to his knees, leaving several folds across the top yet held firmly.

Now he showed his knowledge of human nature in another respect than that he had given Dick the benefit of.

Instead of leaping upon her and so startling the girl into a scream, he strode forward boldly as a companion might, coming from the camp.

He thought she would quietly turn her head, or even without disturbing her reverie, might ask, in that mechanical way we have when moved by languid curiosity without apprehension:

"Is that you, Jim?"

So she might, but that her mind was full of another than Jim just then.

So intently had she been thinking of that other, that the sound of a footstep behind her thrilled her to the heart with the unquestioning conviction that it was he.

Back again so soon? and come straight to her, as the iron to the loadstone!

She sprang up and faced about, blushing furiously, and with her eyes gleaming with a new light. Nothing could have made a more charming picture than her embarrassed face and the lines of coy grace that her figure unconsciously fell into.

She saw a man close upon her, holding a blanket as if to throw it about her. She thought it was he, solicitous to protect her from the dampness of the night air.

So perfect was this illusion, that she was smiling shyly when, instead of falling about her shoulders as she expected, the blanket completely enveloped her head.

Even then she did not at once realize her danger. She thought it had been done in playfulness, though with a rough freedom a little unexpected in such a man as Charley Foraker.

But when an iron hand closed down upon her mouth, while the other gathered the folds of the blanket close about her head, after which an arm encircled her neck with choking force—then she knew, alas, too late!

She was tripped and thrown to the ground, the heavy weight of a man pressing her down.

Another threw himself upon her; and between them they held her so that she could not move a limb.

She knew nothing of what happened after that. There was a season of agonized terror, which lasted she knew not how long, in which every muscle in her body was strained with spasmodic wrenches, as futile as if she had been buried alive and the sod pressed down over her. There was a horrible sense of suffocation, of burning in her lungs, of a crushing weight on her breast. Then came a yielding to her fate, a drifting into calm and oblivion.

"Is she limp?" asked Toby Two-bits, when the spasmodic movements under him ceased.

Dick shifted his position, lifted one foot, and let it fall.

"She's gone, pard," he said. "You'd better give her air, or we'll have to shove her into the quicksands after all."

"We'll have to risk it tell we git her out o' this. Bear a hand, Dick. Have they heard us in the camp?"

"No. The boy's a-laughin'."

With Dick's help Toby lifted the limp body in his arms, and bore it rapidly away.

"I reckon I'll have to carry her tell we kin fetch her to. Take her, Dick, tell I git into the saddle, an' then hand her up."

When he held her thus, while his comrade was mounting, to lead the third horse they had brought by the halter-strap, Toby listened for signs of disturbance in the camp.

Only the merry laughter of the boy, who was

having a tussle with Jim, came through the still night.

"We've got her solid!" declared the abductor triumphantly, "an' a good job done."

Then away they rode till a mile of distance gave them a sense of security.

"Look-a-hyar, Toby," admonished his comrade, anxiously. "I reckon you know your own business; but ef you'll take my advice, you'll see whether you're goin' to be able to fetch that girl to again, before you carry her any further."

"Oh, I reckon it don't hurt 'em much to faint. They do it mighty easy, most of 'em."

"But faintin' an' smotherin' is two different things, an' don't you furgit it."

"She's had the air. I throwed the blanket off her head, as you said, the minute you give her to me."

"That's all right, ef she's been doin' any breathin' sence then. Have you had a squint at her? How does she look in the face?"

"I don't know."

"Waal, it's about time you was findin' out. Show her up, hyar."

While carrying his prize, Toby had left a fold of the blanket falling loosely over her face.

This would have been no serious inconvenience if she had been conscious and breathing.

Now he stopped in the broad moonlight, threw the blanket back, and gazed into the upturned face.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated, "she's as black as yer hat! Have we killed her?"

"I reckon you hain't come fur amiss of it. Put her down hyar on the ground, an' we'll see ef we kin fetch her to."

Toby dismounted hastily, and laid his captive on the fatal blanket.

"Put her flat on her back; let her head down," directed Dick.

"She ain't breathin' a mite!" quavered Toby, in alarm.

But that his anxiety was prompted by no feeling of humanity, was made evident by his next words.

"Thar's a mint o' money gone to thunder! Dolph 'll kick like a steer!"

CHAPTER X.

A NARROW PRISON.

LYING with her face upturned to the moonlight, the girl certainly appeared to be dead. Her eyes were closed; her lovely complexion was now frightfully discolored. She was a purple horror!

"What be you goin' to do?" asked Toby, as Dick hastily straightened her out, and went round to her head.

"I'm goin' to try to fetch her out o' this. I reckon she's about in the same fix as if she had been drowned. It's all the same—cuttin' off the wind."

"But what do you know about drowned folks?"

"Not much. But I see one fetched round once. You take hold of her other arm, an' do as you see me do. Swing it right around, about the same height from the ground, an' up over her head. Now pull—not so hard. Jest move her body a mite. That's as good as if you dragged her all over the quarter section. Now carry it down ag'in, back to her sides. Keep up that motion stiddy, about as fast as you breathe yourself."

"But what does this hyar do to her?"

"It pumps air into her lungs. Don't you see? When you strain the arms up, that spreads the ribs at the bottom; an' when you pass the arms back to the sides, an' press this hyar way, that closes the ribs in ag'in. It's jest like you work a bellows."

"Watch her, pard! Look a' that! We're goin' to fetch her, as sure as you live."

"I'd like to know how you know that."

"Why, the blood's goin' out of her face. Let up on this a minute. Do you see that? She's a-breathin' all alone by herself, as reg'lar as clock-work. She don't want no more help out of us, pard. Leave her alone. She'll come round all right now."

"I'll remember you fur this, Dick. I 'lowed she was a goner."

"She would have been but fur the pumpin'. Don't you disremember it when it comes to the divvy, an' we won't say no more about it."

"Don't you give it away to Dolph."

"Did you ever know me to give a pard away?"

A restless, writhing movement on Alice's part; a gasp, a sigh; and she opened her eyes.

At first she winked and frowned, as if dazzled

by the moonlight. Then came a realization of something strange in her situation.

"What is the— Ah!"

She made a bewildered effort to rise, saw that the men kneeling beside her were strangers, and then recalled the fearful assault, the appalling struggle, the agony of that lapsing into unconsciousness.

With a cry of terror she cowered to the ground between her two captors.

"Don't be afeard of us, miss," said Toby Two-bits, speaking in as soothing a voice as he could command, though, truth to tell, nature had not endowed him very generously in this particular. "We hain't goin' to hurt you none. We'll treat you like the lady you be. The one thing we'll have to beg ye to do fur us in return, is to keep quiet, an' do as you're told."

"Who are you? What are you going to do with me?" cried the terrified girl.

"We're your friends, ef you'll let us be. We hain't got time to talk it over hyar; but you may take what I say is straight goods an' a yard wide every time. You won't be hurt none, an' nobody won't so much as say a word to ye what ain't as perlite as perlite kin be. The cap'n knows as you're a lady, an' he's bound as you shall be treated like one; an' all you're to be asked to do, is to keep quiet, an' not kick up no row, so's we'll have to use you in a way we don't want to, nohow."

What was the meaning of all this? She was a lady; she was to be treated as one; she was to submit quietly to her fate, under penalty of such violence as was necessary to restrain her.

The horrible mockery of the assurances deepened her terror, instead of allaying it. It was plain that she was not the victim of these rough villains, whose worst aim might have been to capture her to hold for a ransom. They were but instruments working the will of another.

But what other? Some one with different instincts from theirs. Some one who sought not to crush her into submission by brutal violence, but to resign her to her fate by kindness—the treatment of a lady, she reflected with a shudder.

The instigator of this cruel outrage had been alluded to as "the cap'n."

It was natural that this should bring up the picture of the soldiers who had visited the boomers' camp, and that her thoughts should leap from them to their citizen guest.

By these rough fellows any gentleman in appearance might be referred to as "the cap'n."

But that the man who had been in her heart for the last twenty-four hours could turn out to be so conscienceless a villain, was too monstrous a thought to be entertained.

For one terrible moment she cowered to the ground, with her hands pressed hard over her face, and a desolation worse than death in her heart.

Then, with a cry of protest, she cast out this demon of suspicion.

"Oh, no! no! no! he could not! he *could* not!"

After this momentary struggle and victory, her courage returned. She lifted a resolute face to her captors, demanding:

"Who is the villain who has employed you for this heartless outrage? Oh, you cannot realize what you are doing! Do you not see that you are destroying my life and happiness? I have nothing to bribe you with, or I would outbid the monster who has set you on. I can only appeal to your humanity. Are you men, and can you do this wicked thing? Has neither of you a sister, a wife? Have you never loved a woman who might now be in my place? Can you think what it would be to you, to know that she was menaced as I am; and yet can you bring this irreparable calamity upon me? Oh, I adjure you—"

"Hold on, miss," interposed Toby, with a scowl of bull-dog obstinacy. "This hyar won't do. We hain't got no time to talk. You'll git a show fur all the chin-music you want when we're in the camp. But jest now, *spry's* the word."

"Tell me, who has hired you—"

"Thar hain't nobody hired us. We're runnin' the thing on our own book."

"You said it was a Captain Somebody."

"Captain? Oh, that's Dolph. Waal, Dolph, he ain't much of a cap'n; but I reckon he'll pass in a crowd."

Alice supposed that she had entirely cast out of her mind the suspicion that Charley Foraker had a hand in her abduction; but the intense thrill of joyous gratitude with which she heard him exonerated showed how untrustworthy a support is our simple faith in one another, in the face of compromising circumstances.

"Who is Dolph?" she asked, further.

As she was meanwhile complying with Toby's wish that she mount forthwith the horse he brought for her, he answered readily enough:

"My pard, miss."

"Not this man?" turning to Dick.

"Oh, no. The chap as bought Luke Trask's outfit."

She heard this with relief. She recurred to the supposition that she had been captured for a ransom.

"But what can be his object in taking me from my friends? He cannot get—"

But a new thought occurred to her, and she cried eagerly:

"Is it possible that he hopes to get some of his money back for me?"

They were already in the saddle, and willing to talk so long as it did not delay them, Toby answered:

"We're 'lowin' to git a heap more'n that out o' you, miss."

"It is in the hope of a ransom, then, that I have been abducted, and not that some—some gentleman has induced you to—"

But the words died on her lips.

However, she had said sufficient to put Toby on a new track.

"Waal, I dunno," he said, hesitatingly. "Do you know of any gentleman as 'ud pay money down fur you?"

He was in hopes of drawing from her the truth about Harold Holland.

"No—no one," she answered, quickly. "I have no friends but Mr. and Mrs. Trask, and you must know that they are not rich."

"Waal, I reckon you kin put up fur yourself."

"But I have no money."

"You will have, one o' these days. We ain't in no hurry, ef you ain't. But we'll ride faster ef we don't talk so fast."

And Toby concluded the fruitless dialogue by whipping up the horses.

In bewilderment, having not an inkling as to Toby's meaning, Alice reached the camp of the brigands, consisting of the familiar tilted schooner in which she had ridden into that wild territory.

Toby Two-bits lost no time, but immediately set his men to work removing the provisions from the schooner.

He then turned to his captive, and demanded the sachel she yet carried on her hip.

"The sachel contains nothing but some papers that belonged to my father. They can be of no value to you," she protested.

"We'll take 'em fur safe-keepin'," insisted Toby, appropriating the sachel forthwith. "We'll have to trouble you, too, fur the trinket you wear about your neck. Not the necklace, miss. That wouldn't be o' no use to us. The fixin' you carry on a ribbon."

"That? But that is my mother's wedding ring! I have never parted with it for a moment since her death. Take anything, everything but that!"

"I reckon that's the reason he was so pertic'ler about that thar. We'll—"

"He? Who?"

"The gent—"

But Toby checked himself.

"You have told me a falsehood!" was the quick accusation. "You *have* been employed by some one."

At that Toby lost his temper.

"Look-a-hyar!" he yelled, drawing his murderous-looking bowie, and thrusting it fairly in her face. "Do you want me to ram this hyar skewer down your throat? You fork over what you're told to, an' keep a still tongue in your head, or you'll—"

But, having got what he wanted, he turned away without finishing his threat.

Completely cowed by his violence, the girl sat in mute despair. Tears refused to flow, though the loss of that sacred keepsake made her heart ache more than all else that had happened to her.

Among other things in the wagon, where some pieces of board, which the ingenuity of Mrs. Trask had designed for various uses, from an extemporized table to an extra wagon-seat, or an inclined plane on which one of the men might stretch himself comfortably on his back after dinner.

After tinkering about with these for a while, Toby presented himself again before his astonished captive, requesting the privilege of measuring her—length, breadth and thickness—as if for her coffin!

To her amazed and apprehensive demand as to what he was going to do to her, he replied:

"Thar'll be a gent o' your acquaintance drop-pin' in on us in the mornin', an' we've got to fix

things so's he won't ketch on to your bein' hyar. No harm is to come to you, miss. Don't you be afeard."

A gentleman of her acquaintance! He feared that Charley and the soldiers would come in search of her when she was missed!

He near her, and she give no sign? She quietly made up her mind to circumvent Messrs. Dolph and Toby, if it was a possible thing. But then, she didn't know them yet!

Toby proceeded to build a compartment in the wagon-box, just large enough to receive his captive lying down, but more closely shut in than she would be in her coffin.

"Now, miss," he said, when it was ready for her reception, "you ain't to be hurt, as I have told you ag'in an' ag'in, though you'll be a mite uncomfortable, maybe, with layin' in one position so long. But that thar can't be helped. I wish't it could."

"Ef Dolph was hyar to boss this job, I reckon he'd tie you up. But I'm a mighty easy man to git along with when you take me right, an' I've left room so'st you kin turn over when you git to achin' with layin' on one side. I've put a folded blanket in thar, too, so's to make it as soft an' comfortable as I kin. You see, I want to use ye well."

"But now, hyar's what you've got to look out fur. I don't like no foolishness, an' when I'm riled I'm ugly."

"Do you see this hyar openin' left in this box? Waal, that's on a line with your neck; an' when anybody's in this hyar camp what we don't want you to git acquainted with, you'll know yer uncle is on deck by feelin' the p'int o' this hyar knife at your throat."

"You kin yell, you kin kick; you kin give us away as easy as rollin' off a log. But ef you do, when they find ye you'll be so's you won't keep nohow but in pickle!"

While listening to him the girl had grown deathly pale. At his conclusion the glitter in his eye filled her with shuddering horror. There was no danger of her crossing his humor while he held that menace over her.

Then she was made to lie down in her coffin-like receptacle, and to her horror the top was nailed firmly in place.

The provisions were then returned to the wagon, being piled upon and about Alice's prison, so that one might look in and fancy he saw all that was worthy of note, without discovering any trace of its secret.

"Now, you better make sure, miss, as I've got this thing down fine, an' you can't dodge me ef you give me cause to fix you fur the undertaker. Try to wriggle your head away. Thar's your throat, an' hyar's my knife."

And he pricked her skin with its point.

"Take it away!" she gasped, icy chills running through her at the contact.

"I done it in your interests as much as in my own. I'd a good deal rather not send you up the flume, ef you don't make me. I hain't got nothin' ag'in' you tell you put my neck in a noose; an' then you bet your sweet life we'll both go in the same boat!"

During the remainder of that night of horror it was impossible for the wretched prisoner to sleep.

The morning brought Deadman Dolph and Harold Holland.

Dolph was informed of her presence by a glance of intelligence exchanged with his *confre*, as has been said.

Harold, of course, could know nothing of it, and so was put on his guard.

His voice thrilled through the listening girl, bringing instant recognition, though she had noticed nothing familiar in his disguised face or figure when he visited Luke Trask's camp.

He, the murderer of her father! Had his malice no bounds, that he sought a second victim in the daughter, who had never harmed him, who would never have crossed his life path again?

CHAPTER XI.

SELF-BETRAYED.

DEADMAN DOLPH, as he rode into camp, indicated his own success by slapping the pocket in which he carried the money he had taken from the dead Luke Trask, and gave Toby Two-bits a chance to account to their common employer by asking:

"Waal, pard, what luck?"

Toby was in the wagon, as he had promised Alice he would be; but the flap at the back was thrown up over the top, so that any one could look clear through the tilted inclosure, and see, apparently, at a glance, everything it contained.

"Ef you go to the camp whar you left the girl yistiddy," answered Toby, bluntly, as if, all be-

ing in the plot, there was no need for reserve, "they'll tell you she's missin'. Hyar's the things what the gent stipulated fur—the sachel, an' the ring on the black ribbon. I didn't take no more gimcracks off of her, 'lowin' as they might be awkward things fur us to have around. Is that all right, boss?"

"Yes," assented Harold, receiving the articles with a shudder.

"She kicked when it come to givin' that up, you may believe me. She said it belonged to her dead-an'-gone mother."

"I have no use for it, except as evidence that she has really been in your possession. I knew that you could not get it without getting her first."

"Waal, ef it troubles you to keep her out of it, an' you want to put it back, you'll have to fish her up out o' the quicksands o' the Canadian. Ef you'll go with me in the mornin', I'll show you whar she lays."

"Spare yourself the trouble!" muttered Harold, in a choking voice.

"Look a-hyar, boss!" cried Toby, with an injured air, "you ain't backin' out o' that thing, be you? Didn't you bargain to have her shoved into the quicksands?"

"Yes! yes! You have done all that I required of you. Let us say no more about it."

"Waal," growled Toby, apparently but half-placated, "ef thar's anythin' I do despise, it's a galoot what tries to slide out an' leave you standin' in his shoes, after he's got his turn served."

"There is no question of my leaving you in the lurch," responded Harold, bristling in a way that won back some of the respect he was fast losing in the eyes of the men who witnessed his depression and attributed it to failing courage.

"After you have done the work, and I have paid you, we are quits. If you are not content wish your bargain, I hold myself in readiness to give you satisfaction in any form you are pleased to state."

There could be no doubt as to the meaning of these words. Whatever else he might be, Harold Holland was not a man who would tamely submit to browbeating.

But a profitless quarrel was the furthest possible from the wishes of any one there.

Without leaving Toby to bridge over an awkward gap, Deadman Dolph broke in enthusiastically:

"Cheese it, Toby! You don't understand the gentleman at all. He has the most convenient kind of a conscience. It don't never trouble him none till the business is over with. Ef you'd seen him let daylight through Luke Trask—or moonlight, rather—you'd say, as I do, that we'd orter go to school to him. He done it all himself. I never lifted a finger. Ain't that so, pardner?"

Of course this was a way of compelling the murderer to acknowledge his crime before witnesses which would have been clumsy, if there had been any real attempt at dissembling the trap.

With an air of contemptuous indifference Holland answered:

"I shot him. You are only an accessory. And now, if you please, we will close our business relations."

"When the money's paid!" answered Dolph, quickly, and with a decision that showed he would keep his man a virtual prisoner till settlement was made.

"Here it is," said Holland, drawing forth a wallet, and counting out the stipulated price.

"An' you had it on you all the while!" cried Dolph, in surprise.

Then he laughed.

"Waal, pardner, I like you all the better fur your cheek. You're a deeper one than I give you credit fur. I wish you well. When you have another leetle job o' this kind, give me a show."

"I shall remember you," answered Holland, the sarcastic bitterness of his reply appearing only in the use of the word "shall," instead of "will."

Then from her narrow prison the horrified girl heard him mount and ride away.

When he was gone, Deadman Dolph came to the wagon, rubbing his hands in gleeful expectation.

"An' now," he cried, "how's our goose o' the golden egg?"

"She's all serene," answered Toby. "Do ye want ter see her?"

"You bet I do! Whar is she, pard?"

"Boxed up hyar in the wagon."

"What! No! Not in that thar wagon?"

"You bet she is, as snug as she ever will be in her coffin."

"Waal, now, you've got a head on you, you have, Toby. But whar in Cain kin she be stowed away in thar? Thar ain't room enough out o' sight."

"Oh, yes, thar is. You'll mighty soon see."

And with the assistance of his men, Toby began to shift the provisions so that the prisoner could be released.

"But, look hyar, Toby," cautioned Dolph. "We'll have to keep in shape fur anybody else what comes alone, lookin' fur her."

"I've got guards on the watch, so's nobody can't reach this motte without our havin' a half-hour's warnin'. In that time we kin stow her away easy."

"I say, Dolph—we don't want to make it any harder fur her than we kin help. I wouldn't like to be shut up like this hyar myself, very long at a time."

"We'll have her out all the while we kin, an' be safe, of course. But this hyar beats the very dickens! We couldn't stand 'em off any way like it."

So Alice was permitted to come forth and enjoy the freedom of the camp, with such privacy as she could secure within the limits of the motte.

Deadman Dolph and Toby Two-bits vied with each other in their rather clumsy politeness to her, actuated, of course, by a hope of future advantage.

"Now, miss," said Dolph, "you mustn't take this thing hard. What me an' my pard's is after is money; an' when you're rich you won't miss a few thousand. We mean to make you jest as comfortable as we kin, an' only shut you up when we have to so's to hang on to you."

"But I am not rich," protested Alice. "You are mistaken in supposing me so."

"You will be, miss. The gent has told us all about it. You have fallen heir to a fortune."

"Then release me now, and I will bind myself by any pledge you please, to pay you the whole of this fortune, whatever it may be."

"We ain't so greedy as that, miss. We won't be hard on ye. We'd take your word fast enough, but your friends might interfere, ye know, and shove us into the stone jug when we come to collect. So we'd druther have the money in hand, an' no more bother, before we let you go. You will excuse us!"

"But I have no friends now. You and that monster have killed the only man I could turn to."

"Not me, miss. The gent owned up himself. You must 'a' hyeared him. As fur friends, you'll have enough when you've got the rocks ag'in."

It was useless to try persuasion with these men. Realizing this, Alice resolved to learn of them what she might turn to future account, if, as now seemed probable, she was to escape with no injury beyond the inconvenience of temporary imprisonment.

"What was the motive of this wretched man for killing poor Luke Trask? Oh, can he indeed be dead?"

"He's gone up, miss. I never see a deader, an' I've seen a heap."

To which Dolph added an account of Luke's secret generosity, and Harold's fears.

"Impoverished himself for me, and I never to know it!" cried the girl. "And now his very life sacrificed on my account. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

And she was overcome with grief.

When she could speak, she asked after Mrs. Trask, and was relieved to be assured that her kind nurse was not included in the cruel plot.

The morning hours were spent without any added suffering, but with the approach of dinner came a hasty announcement:

"Somebody comin', Cap. The sodgers—ridin' like sin!"

Then with all haste Alice was re-incarcerated, to lie trembling like an aspen in a whirl of breathless emotions.

Soldiers—and coming like the wind! He must be with them, urging them on. He had returned to her, to find her gone, and every one in despair. Oh, if he really cared, what must he have suffered! And would he give her up as lost, when day after day passed, and no sign of her was discovered?

The thought made her desperate. Of what avail her recovered freedom, her wealth, if she lost him upon whom her heart was now fixed?

She must find some way of revealing herself to him.

But Toby Two-bits sat in the wagon, peeling potatoes, and tending the fire in the camp-stove with which it was fitted up.

Nothing could be more apparently careless and open than his occupation there.

"But don't you disremember, miss," he cautioned her. "Ef you've any notion as you might git away from me, better try it over ag'in while no harm will come of it."

And he once more thrust his bowie through the opening he had left.

After that the girl scarce dared to breathe. She even feared that she might be accidentally discovered, and her bloodthirsty guardian wreak revenge on her when he saw that all was lost.

To still further guard against suspicion, she heard Deadman Dolph call to his men:

"Come, boys! We want to make this camp look cheerful, as if we didn't have nothin' on our minds but corner lots an' sich. You, Duke and Shorty, give us a mill. Peel! An', boys, the rest o' ye make sich a racket over it, that it'll look as if we didn't hyear the sodgers tell they're near enough to see what's goin' on."

In a twinkling the two pugilists were stripped to the waist, and were slugging away for all they were worth, while their comrades, gathered about them, were yelling encouragement and derision with a vehemence that would have imposed on any one.

On came the dash of the soldiers; and with a bounding heart the prisoner heard the distressed voice of her lover.

The despair in it filled her with a swooning sense of blissful content, and through her closed eyes coursed silent tears of love and gratitude.

CHAPTER XII.

ALL THE WORLD LOVES A LOVER.

WHEN, re-ascending the stream, the soldiers found the spot where they had run the trespassing boomers into the river on the previous night, they discovered traces of the escape of the horsemen, but none of the re-ascent of the schooner out of the treacherous flood.

"It's in thar, boys, as sure as shootin'!" declared Oklahoma Hi.

"Buried completely out of sight!" ejaculated Charley Foraker, gazing with a feeling of awe out over the untroubled current.

"Here is their trail, leading straight away to the south," said Lieutenant Westerly. "Will it pay to follow them up?"

"What fur?" asked Hi. "We kin only exchange the time o' day with 'em now."

"Oh, by all means!" cried Charley, eagerly. "I am anxious to see what sort of fellows they are, since we have had such a chase of it."

"Waal, ef it'll be any fun for you, we might as well take 'em in. Ef they're skeered at our gittin' their names, though, to head 'em off at the land office, I reckon they'll make the most o' their start."

"Let us follow them a few miles. If we don't overtake them, then, we can turn back, and the ride in this glorious air will have done us no harm."

He was buoyant with bounding life, and gay with a new mysterious sense of the beauty of the world. He saw the landscape with a lover's eyes, "bathed in that light which never was on land or sea!"

No one was loath a helter-skelter scamper across the prairies; so the following of the trail soon degenerated from a serious business enterprise into a joyous race, in which horses and riders took equal delight.

But Deadman Dolph's detour was sufficient to tire out the now weakened interest of his pursuers; and Lieutenant Westerly finally called a halt.

"Let the poor devils go," he said. "They have lost their outfit. That ought to be punishment enough for trying to do what all the rest would do quickly, if they got the chance. At any rate, we have no such grudge against them as to warrant our going so far out of our way to persecute them."

This appealed to the common Western impulse to leave a wide margin on the mantel of strict honesty, a field in which every man looks out for himself as he best may, while the spectators look on and laugh.

His commission not yet exhausted, Westerly returned to the forbidden ground, with better success in his second venture.

The result of the day's scout was the escorting of two parties across the boundary.

This was done with a great deal of joking and laughter, not altogether relishful to the boomers.

Then came a second night encampment, which

the soldiers as well as their guest would gladly have had in their quarters of the night before, but that they were too far away.

In the morning they set out on their return to the fort, their rations having been laid in for no more than a two-days' excursion.

Charley Foraker a little shamefacedly suggested to his friend Westerly that they keep the southern side of the Canadian. His excuse was too transparent to deceive one who had had an eye on him two nights before; and it was with a teasing twinkle that Westerly consented.

The desire to water their horses and refresh themselves led them to deflect their line of march so far as to take in the motte where the ghastly witness of crime awaited them, and Charley Foraker gazed in horror and swift-coming fear at the dead guardian of the woman he loved.

"Oh, Bert! Look! look!" he cried. "It is Trask! What is he doing here? What can have happened to the rest of them?"

"Deploy, men!" shouted Lieutenant Westerly. "Look for the trail of a wagon."

But none was found. Instead, they came upon Luke's dead horse.

"He has come here alone, from the westward," said Oklahoma Hi. "He must have left his family for some reason, an' sot out to go back to the lower ford."

This was the place where they had all passed so pleasant an evening; and the explanation was the one that would most naturally suggest itself.

"He has come to this motte to camp over night, picketed his hoss out yan, an' then come in hyar with his saddle over his shoulder fur a pillar."

"He got a hot reception. Some o' the brigands what I hinted to you about was hyar before him; an' seein' a lone man, they concluded to plug him fur what he might have on him. They don't ask much. They'll lay a man out fur a good deal less'n the price of a hoss."

"See! Hyar's whar they got in the first shot on him—right on the aidge o' the woods. Thar's the marks whar he jumped when the first shot struck him. He got it plumb in front, in his left lung, thar."

"That was a finisher, ef they'd only knowed it. But he jumped as if they hadn't tetcht him. See whar he landed with that saddle."

"They went fur him ag'in; but the saddle ketcht that."

"The third bullet found him whar he lived ag'in—under the left shoulder-blade, thar, ye see. It picked him up while he was crawlin' off to this bush whar he laid down to rest."

"How can you tell such a detail as that?" asked Lieutenant Westerly, following the scout's reading of the signs with wondering interest.

"From the direction o' the bullet. You see, by the way he's layin' he faced 'em when he had to pull up. They couldn't have got it into him so after that, without goin' 'round yonder. But he was jest in line while he was crawlin' to cover."

"Oh!" interrupted Charley Foraker, impatiently, "what is the use of this delay, merely to gratify curiosity? The man is dead! What difference does it make whether the first or second bullet killed him? Meanwhile—"

"One minute!" urged Oklahoma Hi, who had picked up Luke's revolver for examination. "He got in one shot at 'em. Stand away thar, boys. Let's see if he pinked the feller he shot at. We may have a wounded man to hunt as the murderer."

"I beg your pardon!" apologized Charley Foraker. "I see that I have been over hasty."

"No bones broke, pardner," replied Oklahoma Hi, cheerfully, as he went to the spot where Harold Holland had crouched when Luke's bullet struck him, and got on his knees to examine the ground closely.

He found no blood, though he followed both of the trails of the murderers for some distance.

"He was too fur gone, I reckon," he concluded. "Thar ain't nothin' but to freeze to their tracks tell we run 'em into the ground."

"But his family?" again interposed Charley. "It is surely more urgent to protect the living than to avenge the dead. This can wait—a few hours will make no difference—till we have ascertained whether a like calamity may not have overtaken those dependent upon him."

There was very little likelihood of such a thing, judging from the indications before them, which seemed to mark one of those unpremeditated murders of which new and lawless countries supply countless instances. But looking into Charley Foraker's blanched and quivering

face, Hi thought he understood the source of friend's anxiety, and yielded at once.

"That ain't a bad idee, pardner," he said. "We kin come back hyar an' pick up this trail any time."

"I would go by myself, and leave you to follow up the murderers," said Charley, apologetically. "But in this country, where I confess all landmarks look very much the same to me, I fear I should get lost, and waste precious time in aimless wandering."

"I kin save you quite a piece, by makin' a bee-line fur the ford. I reckon we might as well be on the move, as thar ain't nothin' more to look into hyar."

So, to Charley's intense relief, they set out at once.

Hi's bee-line was a good thing in its way; but it took them by the spot where the Trask party was waiting the return of its head.

So, into the camp at the ford they dashed, Charley's eager eyes recognizing the tilted wagon first of all.

"Safe! safe!" he shouted, in the first burst of exultant relief.

Surely this was a camp upon which no conscious calamity had fallen. Its occupants were so intent in the noisy sport of a bout at fisticuffs, that they did not observe the strangers till they were fairly in their midst.

But who were these fellows, whose rude pastime, innocent enough in itself, was yet ill suited to any but a camp made up entirely of men; and where were the women?

As he discovered the half-nude pugilists, Charley glanced again at the wagon, to see how he could have mistaken it for the one of which they were in quest.

But no. There was the pipe of the camp-stove just back of the driver's seat, and two flags crossed on the side of the tilt, above the inscription:

"OUR OKLAHOMA HOME."

Wondering, and indignant that his loved one should be made a witness of such a scene, Charley, disregarding of the men whom he considered intruders, rode round to where he could look into the tilt through the back end.

He met the apparently surprised stare of the seeming cook, who, after a momentary pause in which he held a half-peeled potato in one hand, and his bowie in the other, demanded, with the bantering air with which insolent curiosity is often rebuked:

"Waal, young feller, have we got anythin' what belongs to you in hyar?"

And laughing in Charley's face, he went on:

"You'd orter know me when you see me ag'in. My name is Toby Two-bits. I'd hand you my card, but my fingers is dirty with these hyar Murphies. Howsomever, ef you'll stay to dinner, I'll take you round, an' interduce you to the neighbors."

"What is the meaning of this?" cried Charley, ignoring Mr. Two-bits's banter, and turning to Oklahoma Hi. "This is certainly Luke Trask's wagon. But how does it come into the possession of these men? And where are the women?"

He was as pale as death with a sudden unmanly fear. The incongruity of the conduct of these men with what might be expected of a band of marauders red-handed with the murder of a whole family, did not strike him at first.

"Hold on, boss," interposed Deadman Dolph, with the calmness of a man assured in his position. "This hyar was the property of Luke Trask, as you say; but I reckon the right an' title to it now is in yer humble sarvant, Adolphus B. Yeager—better known as Deadman Dolph."

"How do you come to own it?" demanded Oklahoma Hi, with a piercing glance that might have nettled a man sensitive as to any implication against his integrity.

But before Dolph could reply, Charley pressed upon him the question:

"What has become of Mr. Trask's family?"

How the quiver in his voice, and its distressed cadences, thrilled through the heart of the listening girl, so near that he could almost have reached out his hand and touched her, but for the intervening boards of the wagon-box.

Was it possible that a lover could be so near, and yet have no subtle monition of the heart that was beating almost to suffocation with the mad impulse to voice itself in one long cry—only his name, his dear name?

Toby Two-bits, while staring straight out at the actors in the scene before him, as if wholly absorbed in what they were saying, dropped his hand idly at his side.

The imprisoned girl saw the gleaming blade

the her cell, and rest with its point within inch of her palpitating throat.

A shiver passed through her, and she was still.

As if quite indifferent about whom he answered first, Dolph replied to Charley:

"Ef it's Luke Trask's family as you're after, you'll find 'em, I reckon, in camp, fifteen mile or so further down the river. Leastways, thar's whar I left 'em yistiddy. Luke himself you'll have to hunt some'r's between thar an' Purcell, by this time."

There was nothing in the unhesitating voice or unwavering eye of the speaker, which indicated that he knew the ghastly truth of his statement, that Luke was to be found somewhere between there and Purcell.

In his relief, Charley involuntarily ejaculated, in a low tone, yet loud enough to be heard by the strained ears which henceforth would willingly let nothing that he said escape them:

"Thank God!"

Deadman Dolph turned back to Oklahoma Hi, answering him in turn:

"Ef the gent is quieted, he'll maybe give me leave to fit you out with three words. I bought it."

"What evidence have you of your purchase?" demanded Lieutenant Westerly, with something of the imperiousness of a soldier.

Dolph turned upon him with a stare which asserted a freeman's right to respectful treatment.

"Have you got many more inquisitive ones among you? Who's the head man in this crowd, I'd like to know?"

"You will answer with as little insolence as is consistent with your make-up, and save yourself further trouble," retorted Bert, sternly.

"When you show me a man who has the right to make me prove my own property, I'll give him all the evidence he wants."

"I am such a one. I speak as the representative of the commander at Fort Reno."

"I would recommend the representative o' the commander not to put on more airs than the commander himself," said Dolph, quite coolly, as he reached inside the breast of his coat, and produced a wallet from which he drew the evidence of sale which he had received from Luke Trask. "To the representative o' the Commander at Fort Reno, who is in authority over this hyar districk, I have the honor to present this hyar bill o' sale, signed an' sealed an' witnessed, all accordin' to Gunter, ef you'll allow me to say so."

To such a sarcasm from an honest man, there was no first rate reply. And a glance at the paper showed that it was *prima facie* evidence that Deadman Dolph was such a man, who, knowing that he was all right, dared face the world boldly.

Westerly bit his lip, and wisely passed over this little interchange of civilities.

Pressing to his side to look at the paper over his shoulder, Charley Foraker's eye fastened like a hawk upon one signature clearly distinguished from the rest.

It was a clever move on Deadman Dolph's part, to secure Alice Coverleigh among the witnesses to his document.

Luke Trask's signature, his wife's and the man Jim's, were scrawls that told nothing to any one unfamiliar with them. As far as they went, the whole thing might be a forgery executed by Deadman Dolph himself half an hour before it was demanded of him.

But the graceful tracing that Alice Coverleigh had left on the paper—could such a thing of beauty be produced by any other hand in all the Indian Territory?

No one of those who now looked upon it had ever seen her signature before; yet none of them for a moment thought of questioning the authenticity of the document thus attested.

Charley Foraker was so delighted at this seeming evidence that no harm had come to his darling from the man before him at least, that he cried without reserve, in a tone that set the imprisoned listener's pulses to throbbing with a glow that even Toby Two-bits knife could not chill—

"It is Miss Coverleigh's signature! My dear sir, when did you see her last?"

A satirical man might have smiled at Charley's sudden assumption of cordiality.

Dolph answered with a shrug:

"Yistiddy, about noon."

"And she was well?"

Even Dolph could not resist the temptation to chaff this young lover, who was now all eager smiles, and almost rubbing his hands with glee.

"Waal," he drawled, so as to set every one to grinning, "she was so's to be about."

Even Alice, in all her wretchedness, smiled. But she had good reason to—the best reason of all there. How he loved her! Every tone and accent vibrated with his gladness.

He scarcely listened to Dolph's account of his purchase, and of the reason of Luke Trask's going to Purcell. That terrible load of fear lifted from his heart, whatever satisfied Westerly and Oklahoma Hi would satisfy him.

When, convinced that they had no further business with honest Dolph Yeager—honest at least, it seemed, as far as unhappy Luke Trask was concerned—they were ready to take their departure, and leave the pugilists free to resume their interrupted mill, they found Charley waiting.

So much happiness had our young lover received from honest Dolph, that he had no difficulty in discovering in his ill-favored face redeeming traits of rude yet sterling manhood, which marked a rough diamond. He admired his blunt independence, and a great many other things which he did not take the time just then to enumerate.

He wound up by shaking hands with him heartily and expressing the wish that, as he had some thoughts of settling in the country himself, at least for a time, they might see more of each other.

He even included Toby Two-bits in his goodwill, and laughingly told him that he was sorry he could not accept the invitation to dinner which had been so hospitably tendered to him, but that he would be delighted to partake of his fare at some future time, if opportunity offered.

As if this were not openheartedness enough, he told the pugilists that he had a weakness for the manly art himself, and then and there challenged the victor, whichever it might prove, for a bout of four rounds, only stipulating for gloves and Queensbury rules, the place to be the barracks at Fort Reno.

They all laughed at him; but he won the hearts of every man Jack of them.

Then away over the prairie, with eyes that were ever striving to pierce the distance, that held—what?

"Waal, boys, how's that? Haw! haw! haw! haw?" roared Deadman Dolph, shaking hands with all his men, yet most of all with Toby Two-bits, when the last of the soldiers was out of earshot.

When they released Alice, they found her drowned in tears. She fell on her knees at Deadman Dolph's feet, and begged him to let her go, as she had not begged when only her own happiness was in contemplation.

There was a twinkle in his eye, as he replied:

"Oh, don't you worry, miss. We'll have that gent back hyar in no time, tearin' his hair, o' course, but only gittin' further an' further gone because his good luck don't come to him too easy. You'll have him all the solider when you git him; an' I wish I might dance at your wedding."

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE QUICKSANDS.

How gayly out young lover went to his disappointment. How blankly he stared at the distracted woman and frightened lad who clung to his hands, one weeping and clamoring brokenly, the other hugging the hand he held in trembling silence.

When going to the wife who could not yet know her wretchedness, he had sought to curb the eager joy that would sparkle in his eyes in spite of him. And now, what was her misery to his?

Gone! Gone how, and where, and why?

Why did this good woman kneel at his feet, and seem to be begging his pardon, as if in permitting the loss of the girl who had been in her charge she had done him a wrong?

If Charley could have seen his own face, he might have known why she forgot even her husband in thinking of him.

She had seen the tremulous eagerness of his searching glance, as he rode up. She had seen his stare of amazement and fear when he first caught signs of trouble there. She had seen the white foreboding in his face, and the piteous deprecation in his eyes, and heard the husky dread in his voice, as he asked for Alice.

"Oh, Mr. Foraker, she's gone, lost! I hain't the faintest idee what has become of her! She went away from us last night in the moonlight, thinkin', I believe my soul, about you. We never see her ag'in, never, from that minute to this. We never hyeared a sound. Oh, sir, you hain't— Oh, no! no! you wouldn't have the heart— But—but—you—you hain't

inticed her away from us!—have you?—have you?"

It was but the despair that sought any news of the lost one, to escape from the terrifying uncertainty of her having disappeared without a sign. The woman knew that this man, who listened to her as if he were turned to stone, could know nothing of the mystery.

"I!" he cried, shrinking from her as if she had accused him of murdering the dearest creature in the world to him. "I?"

"Oh, forgive me!" she wailed. "Don't hark to it. I am crazed! I only want her—oh, I want her back! What will Luke say to me when I tell him I let her git lost? Oh, I do feel fur you, sir! We air all pore miserable creature's together! What will we do—what will we ever do without her?"

Charley was no longer listening. He had put his hand to his head, as if struggling to realize what had happened.

"Gone," he repeated, "without a sound! Did you say to the river?"

It was that, then, that he was struggling to keep out of his mind—the dread possibility that she had fallen into the river, to be sucked down, down, down, in the remorseless quicksands!

"But she would have made some outcry," he protested, as if forcing an unanswerable objection between his quailing heart and the demon specter that loomed over him. "Oh, she must have made some outcry."

He turned to Oklahoma Hi, wringing his hand, and speaking to him as if he were his dearest friend.

"Hi! Hi! you must help me find her. She is somewhere! We must find her!"

It was a cry of unreasoning despair, just as her dear old nurse had urged so helplessly only that she wanted her back.

"I will," promised Hi, fairly crushing the hand he held in his iron grip. "Come, boys! This hyar ain't no time fur standin' around. Rub them hosses down, an' git all the fodder you kin into 'em. Git your shootin'-irons in better shape than you ever had 'em before; but stay right hyar, an' don't go trampin' around rubbin' out sign."

"Ma'am, will you tell me whar you see her last? Which way did she go?"

But Mrs. Trask was bewildered. The more she strove to think, the more apparent it became that she really had not noticed Alice's departure. She was struggling to think now, only because she thought it was so important that she should know.

Not wasting precious time, Hi set out on his own hook.

Charley would not let him go alone, but dogged his heels, fairly stepping in his tracks, so that he might not inadvertently obliterate some footprint upon the discovery of which might hang the whole issue.

Mrs. Trask explained to Lieutenant Westerly that Jim had gone in quest of her husband. He was her dependence. In all moments of trouble she turned naturally to him. In her helplessness at the calamity that had prostrated them all, she had so little confidence in Jim that, after the first moments of wild rushing to and fro, vainly calling Alice's name, she had forced him to pocket his self-importance, and go for Luke, like a messenger-boy.

It was lucky that she had done this before all traces had been made unintelligible by the blundering, though willing, Jim.

Oklahoma Hi found the scene of that brief struggle, and pointing to the ground, said:

"Don't wear that look on your face no longer. She ain't in the quicksands."

"Not in the quicksands?" repeated Charley, helplessly.

"She has been carried off."

"Carried off? By whom? Where? Is she alive?"

His head was in a whirl. He scarcely knew what he was asking. He was struggling for some gleam of hope. How he clung to Hi, as if everything were to him an open book.

"I don't believe she's been hurt," declared the scout. "Whoever got her, wanted her alive."

"And she had been struggling here in the grasp of some villain?"

The white fury in Charley's face boded no good to the man who had wronged the woman he loved, if he once got him in his clutches!

"Not much," said Hi. "They took her easy. But let's be goin'. Hey, boys! we're ready fur them hosses!"

Lieutenant Westerly had not the heart to tell Mrs. Trask of her loss. He thought it better that she should be where she could have the sympathetic care of women when the painful news was broken to her.

He left one of his men to conduct her and the lad to the nearest boomers' camp, and with the rest left the spot under Oklahoma Hi's guidance.

But Toby Two-bits was a cunning fox. The trail ran out and was never found again.

For days they searched. Charley never slept. Worn to the very shadow of his former self, he wandered from camp to camp, appealing to everybody for help and intelligence.

But no one had seen any trace of the lost girl; and though they gave him words of sympathy the inevitable sacrifice of their own prospects if they continued what they were only too anxious to pronounce a forlorn hope, made them fall away from him as the eventful Monday approached. They quieted their feelings by urging that there was no longer a reasonable doubt that, if abducted at all, the unfortunate girl had been made away with; and of course the quicksands were the most likely place in which to cover up a crime.

So came Sunday, and with it, word to the despairing searchers that a strange man had been found lying alone in the woods, almost at the point of death. He was suffering from peritonitis, induced by a glancing wound in the side, which might not have proved serious if he had had medical care in time. Now in his delirium the name of Alice Coverleigh was often on his lips. It was supposed that the abductor had been found.

Charley went to his bedside on the wings of the wind; and there he was prostrated with the conviction that he had come to the end of his miserable quest at last.

In the disjointed ravings of the wretched Harold Holland, he learned the story of his reckless life, ending in the murder of his own father and the wanton destruction of an innocent man. He learned, too, of his pursuit of Luke Trask, and of the heartless plot for the destruction of Alice Coverleigh.

Of course Harold conveyed the impression he himself had, that the girl had been sunk in the quicksands.

Then Charley, weakened by his long agony of suspense, broke down in tears of utter wretchedness. The dream of his life was shattered!

It was the voice of Oklahoma Hi that roused him to a new purpose.

In his ravings Holland had mentioned Deadman Dolph. With all else lost, vengeance yet waited the strong and steady hand!

Lieutenant Westerly and his men were there. He had stuck by his friend with unshaken loyalty, even after he himself had abandoned hope.

And how they rode, the avengers! Taking the infection from Charley's despair, every man felt as one personally aggrieved.

But, what was this? One of their number, who had been on an errand, was missing from the saddle of a horse that stood quietly grazing by the roadside!

Following the trail of the horse back for a mile or more, they were arrested by the feeble cry of a man, who proved to be the missing soldier.

He was wounded, and told his story brokenly.

"Are you after Deadman Dolph and his crowd?" he asked, and when assured that they were, continued: "I thought so. I met one of 'em—the slipperiest one of the lot: Toby Two-bits he calls himself. He was makin' time the best he knew how, and by his white face I knew that he was up to some mischief. I made up my mind to halt him, and fetch him to headquarters to explain himself. But he never stopped for me. He went for me at long range, and he fixed me, you see. Don't stop on my account, lieutenant. Leave me a canteen, if you can spare one, and come back for me when you have nothing better to do. If you'll one of you put a bullet through that chap, as big as *two-bits*, in my name, that's all I'll ask of you. Go for 'em, boys, and down 'em for all they're worth!"

They went. How they went!

From an eminence, the field-glass revealed to them the fugitive fleeing on the distant horizon.

Fear is a good runner, but rage is a good stayer; and mile after mile they stuck to him, slowly closing the gap.

Into the camp he dashed, white and gasping with fear.

"The game's up, Dolph! Git out o' this, boys. Scatter! Every man fur himself. The sodgers is comin'! They've got onto it all—everything! That snoozer has gone loney, an' blowed us sky-high!"

Dolph seized hold of his half-crazed confederate, and by some round swearing sought to

bring him to a more connected account of himself. But he had only one thing to say—they were betrayed, and the avengers were coming.

The rumor of the discovery of Harold had come to his ears. He had gone to reconnoiter, only to find his worst fears realized, and Charley Foraker already on the ground.

During all that despairing search they had coolly camped at the ford, like honest boomers, content to await the opening day without the barrier.

On the appearance of his partner, coursing like the wind, Dolph had consigned Alice to her prison once more.

Now, in his rage at the balking of his further plans, he was moved to wreak revenge on her helplessness.

"We'll slit her gullet from ear to ear!" he roared. "They're welcome to her in that shape."

"We won't do no sich blame-fool thing," objected Toby. "Ain't they after us hot enough already? Leave her hyear, an' she'll yell to 'em; an' that'll keep 'em a little while, at least. What we're after, is to git away."

And this counsel fortunately prevailed.

Away they sped, scattering to distract the pursuit.

Like men without fear the pursuers dashed into the mottle. Some might be shot down; but those who were left would make short work of all they found.

"They are gone!" cried Charley Foraker. "Keep on, till we hound them to death!"

He would have swept forward without drawing rein, but he was arrested by a sound that sent the blood tingling through his veins like sparks of electric fire—a shrill scream, as of one who snatched with all the energy of despair at a last fleeting hope.

"Charley! Charley! Charley!"

"What is that? Oh, is it possible? Alice, darling, where are you?"

"Here, in the wagon! Oh! oh! oh!"

How he leaped—falling headlong—from his saddle into the wagon! How he tore away every intervening obstacle, flinging them he knew not where, till he held her in his arms!

With a sob of ecstasy she clasped him about the neck!

Oklahoma Hi saw so much. Then he shouted: "On, boys! We ain't needed hyar!"

And away they sped, leaving the lovers to a scene that needs no depicting.

"That's two of 'em stickin' together," said Hi, as he ran his eye along the spreading line of fugitives. "That's whar the money is; an' it always takes two rascals to carry an undivided pot. Them's our meat. Never mind the rest."

Over the border they chased them; then out again; then once more there seemed no escape but in the forbidden territory.

But at this point they plunged into a ford, to be challenged by a squad of soldiers stationed on the other side.

There was no chance to back out. To go forward, was to be arrested, and so held in fatal bondage.

"Down-stream!" shouted Dolph. "It's our one chance, an' a mighty slim one at that."

Toby Two-bits followed him without a word. Inwardly he was cursing the greed that had impelled him to stick to his confederate, whom he chose to regard as the chief criminal, and so the one to whom Oklahoma Hi clung, to the abandonment of every one else; but regrets were now too late.

The soldiers, riding along the bank, shouted in warning to them, which they ignored in scornful silence.

Now their horses were swimming. Now they were floundering over a sandbar. Once more into deep water, with a plunge that almost submerged them. Again on that treacherous bottom, Toby's jaded horse struggling in frantic despair.

Then a mild plunging without forward motion. A screaming whinny of terror from the doomed animal. A yell of dismay from the man who sought to throw himself from the saddle, but found that his foot was caught in the stirrup. A fierce boiling of yellow water; a lurch forward; a last gurgling cry; and the tide rolled on!

The avengers came up on the southern bank, Oklahoma Hi in advance, but closely followed by Lieutenant Westerly.

Dolph had thrown himself off his foundering horse, and was swimming without hope, impelled only by a dogged determination never to give up.

His strength was failing; his weapons weighed him down.

Knowing that the end was come, and prefer-

ring the comparative triumph of suicide—humiliation of shameful expiation, he tor fatal money from his breast, and shaking it faintly at his enemies, roared:

"Good-by! Deadman Dolph never surrenders to boomers or blue-coats!"

A wild laugh of hyena-like scorn, and he disappeared from view forever!

THE END.

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